

Monster Tamer



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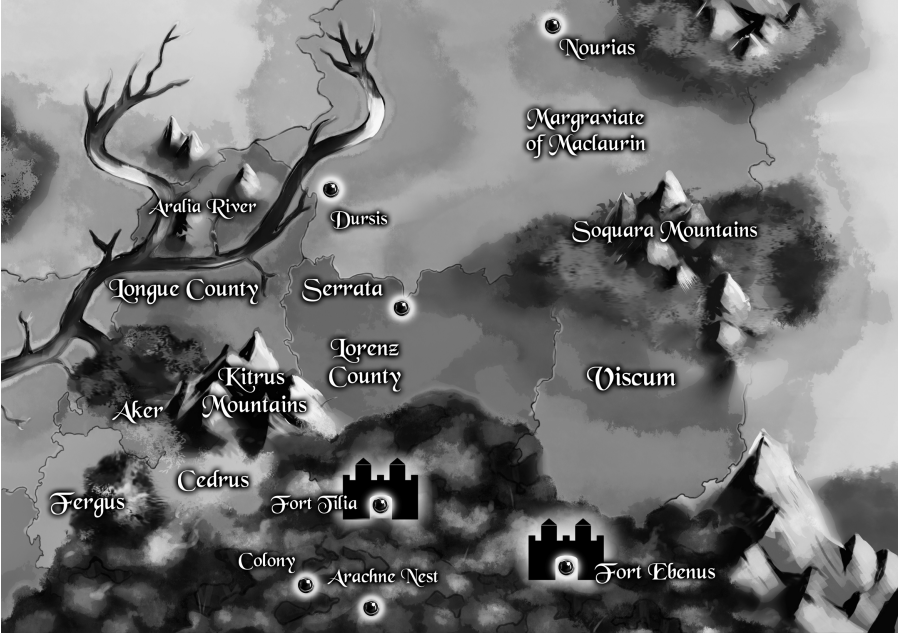


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Chapter 1: Escort Duty

The grand cathedral, located in the largest city of the Eryx Empire, was the headquarters of the Holy Church, the organization that enlightened the people about the great endeavors of history's saviors. The stone building was decorated with beautiful sculptures that almost seemed transparent, demonstrating how holy a place this was.

Some sections of the grand cathedral were only open to authorized personnel of the Holy Church. A large man with dark skin and a bald head walked down one such arched hallway. He was Gordon Cavill, the vice marshal of the Holy Order and the commander of its Second Company.

The hallway looked out over a garden overflowing with flowers and greenery, so on a good day, one could see a beautiful scene indicative of this place's sacredness. Unfortunately, the last few days had been cloudy, which made the mood all the gloomier.

Gordon picked up his pace, and before long, he arrived at the door to his destination. He knocked, and upon hearing a response from within, he entered. His thick brows knitted together slightly, because the person he was looking for was not at the office desk in front of him. Gordon came to a stop, and someone called out to him from the guest sofas.

"Over here, Gordon."

It was the room's owner, the marshal of the Holy Order, Harrison Addington. His nearly two-meter-tall frame was seated on a sofa. Other visitors were in the room too. One was a slender old man wearing a priest's habit, his back as straight as a flagpole. He was Archbishop Gerd Kruger, the highest-ranking man in the Holy Church. Seeing as how the church possessed more global influence than any other organization, it was no exaggeration to say that he held the highest position in the world.

Facing Harrison and Gerd on the opposite sofa were two boys. Realizing who they were, Gordon stood at attention.

"Forgive me. Have I interrupted an important conversation with these great saviors?"

"No, no, not at all," one of the boys replied affably. "We just came here to ask some stuff. Besides, now's as good a time as any to call it. Right then, Kouzu, shall we get going?"

“Sure, Hebiiwa.” The other boy nodded and stood up from the sofa. Even though he didn’t seem very cheerful, he smiled as he bowed. “Thank you very much for speaking with me.”

“It’s fine. I’m glad we could help alleviate your reservations,” Gerd said in the quiet tone of a clergyman. “There are many priests aside from me in this cathedral who are sure to lend you their aid. Please allow them to help you so that your spirit may learn peace.”

“Thank you.”

Guided by a woman who’d been standing to the side, the boys left the room. After seeing them off, Gerd gave Harrison a grave look.

“I shall also take my leave, then,” he said. “Soothing the great saviors’ hearts is our duty. Devote yourself to supporting them in battle.”

“Understood,” Harrison answered.

As Gerd left the room, Gordon lowered his head to the old man. He hadn’t expected the archbishop to be here, but the fact that he was clued Gordon in on the situation.

Until a few days ago, Gordon had been searching for the fake savior that’d been causing an uproar in the southern Empire. However, this “fake savior” had actually been multiple visitors who’d committed grave errors. The Holy Church had taken in several such visitors and was administering mental care. The two visitors who’d just left the room had definitely been one such case.

Saviors had gravely erred and caused unrest. Such information could destabilize human society, so the truth had been kept from all but the smallest of inner circles. Even Gordon had been out of the loop. He knew now, however, and he wasn’t the only one who’d learned of it either. In fact, that was one of the problems he was facing right now.

“Now then, I’ve kept you waiting, Gordon,” Harrison said. “It must be that report you mentioned. Let me hear it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Gordon nodded, then began his report.



“I see... This is far from ideal.”

After Gordon finished his report, Harrison grimaced. Gordon had detailed the current condition of the Empire’s citizens. His subordinates had been dispatched to every region to deal with monsters, so they’d gathered information from churches across the land. Even if some information was lacking, Gordon had amassed enough for them to get a rough idea of things.

Unrest was spreading all over the Empire. The direct cause for this was that the exploration team, the organization formed of an

unprecedented number of visitors, had made a declaration one month ago. They had protested against Margrave Maclaurin for dispatching his army to subjugate a visitor, Majima Takahiro, as the “fake savior.”

That in and of itself had created a tremendous wave throughout the Empire, but they’d taken it even further, claiming that Majima Takahiro was no fake and that the incidents in the southern Empire were a scandal caused by several visitors across the region. This information was the reason Gordon had been able to guess what was going on earlier with the boys in Harrison Addington’s office. The secret the Holy Church had been keeping under wraps had already been exposed to the public eye.

What’s more, around the time this declaration spread throughout the Empire, one of the Five Northern Kingdoms, Aker, had made a declaration of their own that confirmed these details. They’d announced to the world that they were now allied with Majima Takahiro. The public proclamation included details of the relentless attack Majima Takahiro had suffered at the hands of the Maclaurin Provincial Army, as well as an explanation for how Aker had arrived at allying with him after he protected their citizens from the provincial army and the Holy Order’s Fourth Company. Normally, as a vassal nation, Aker didn’t hold much influence in the Empire, but because their declaration matched the one made by the exploration team, it had the power to shake the entire world.

Currently, feudal lords from all over the Empire were inundating Margrave Maclaurin with criticism. Even the southern nobles were questioning his responsibility, despite the fact that the margrave was the alpha noble of the entire southern Empire.

On the other hand, voices were also raised in support of the margrave. This was an unprecedented situation. It was natural for nobles who held similar positions and ideals to support the margrave, but that only applied during normal times. It was exceedingly rare for anyone to protest against a declaration made by saviors, the very symbol of absolute justice.

As for how things had ended up like this, it was entirely the fault of the Holy Order’s Fourth Company. The Maclaurin Provincial Army had worked with Travis Mortimer to carry out Majima Takahiro’s subjugation. Saviors were the symbol of justice, but so was the Holy Order, and when those two symbols clashed—at least in the eyes of those who didn’t know the particulars—it was inevitable that things would become chaotic among the nobles.

Above all else, the general populace, who’d led simple lives believing in both saviors and the Holy Church, were left greatly perplexed. At least according to what was written in historical records, there’d never been any sort of discord between saviors and

the church. Justice had been absolute, but now it wasn't. Whom were they supposed to believe? It was the first time the people of this world had ever had to consider that question. In a sense, the spreading unrest was inevitable.

"The damage monsters have done is also concerning," Harrison said as he put the documents he held down on his desk. At the very top was a report of the damage suffered across the land. One of the knights who'd been in the field had stated, "Confirmed increase in monster activity, unfortunately timed, which may have a negative effect on recent instability."

"The world has been greatly shaken," Harrison muttered, an air of regret in his voice.

Gordon clenched his fist. "If not for that incident with Travis, this would never have happened."

The direct causes of this were Majima Takahiro's existence, the exploration team's endorsement of him, and Aker's declaration of an alliance. That wasn't what had started all this, however. Struggling to survive, the concerned parties had simply reached out to those in similar circumstances and demanded they be given proper rights.

The greater causes were Margrave Maclaurin and Travis Mortimer, the ones who'd complicated everything so much. This was especially true of the latter, who'd moved entirely for personal ambition, unlike the former, who'd been spurred by his sense of justice.

"If it was going to end up like this, I should've used my own hands to..."

To any caring knight, Travis Mortimer and his Fourth Company couldn't be stomached. Nevertheless, no matter what misdeeds they did, they couldn't be censured or judged if no conclusive evidence existed. Travis had been very cunning in that respect. To anyone judging him fairly, it'd been impossible to stop Travis's advancement among the ranks after all his achievements.

The only way to stop Travis would've been to kill him. Doing so would have led to Gordon's downfall, of course, and he would've lost his honor as a knight and surely been executed for it. Still, Gordon regretted that he hadn't done so, even knowing the consequences. At the very least, had he done it, incidents like the slaughter of those innocent elves might not have happened. Gordon's fists clenched at the thought.

"Cut that out," Harrison said. "I can't lose you over something like that. I'm at fault for allowing Travis's selfish behavior. I should've been the one to stop him, even if it meant killing him."

"Sir Harrison!" Gordon shouted. "That's not true! The Holy Order cannot exist without you!"

Harrison was a great knight who gave everything he had to maintain world order. As it was now, the Holy Order couldn't continue without his presence. In fact, the reason Travis hadn't ascended beyond the rank of commander of the Fourth Company despite going after promotions by any means possible was because he hadn't been able to drag Harrison down.

"Gordon, I'm happy to hear you say that. I will fulfill my responsibility as marshal and overcome this situation." Harrison smiled affably, but then his expression tensed. "Rather than wallow in regret, I want you to devote your efforts to fulfilling your duty. Do not forget. As descendants of visitors, we are not members of this world by nature. Maintaining the stability of the world is our duty."

"Of course."

"Then let me get straight to the point. Your mission."

Harrison pulled out a document from his desk drawer. Gordon accepted it, looked it over, then stared at Harrison in disbelief.

"Escort duty to bring Mister Majima Takahiro to the imperial capital?"

"Yes. Now that it has come to this, things will not resolve unless we intervene," Harrison said gravely. "Not even that stubborn margrave can refuse to attend when presented with the joint signatures of the exploration team and the Holy Church. This was decided after discussing it with Lord Gerd. All that's left is to see whether Mister Takahiro will attend. Going by Aker's claims, he is a sincere man. If we show him good faith, he should come. Things are already underway to convince him. That's why I'd like you to go meet him."

Harrison paused and stared at Gordon, a powerful glint in his eye.

"You're the only man I can trust with this. Can I ask you to go?" he said.

"Of course! Even if it costs my life, I will complete this mission!"

Gordon struck his chest with a thud. This was an important mission to protect the stability of the world, and he would definitely see it through. He then left to confer with his subordinates and begin his duty.

The world was on the move.



Chapter 2: The Girl in Thought

~Katou Mana's POV~

One month had passed since we escaped the Maclaurin Provincial Army. We were staying at the royal palace in Aker, the nation with which we now had an alliance. Our relationship with the Akerian royal family was favorable, especially with Prince Philip. The royal family valued Majima-senpai highly because he had saved their citizens. I was also very happy to see others recognizing him.

Everyone who'd lost their homes in Rapha and Kehdo had been permitted to stay with us for a while. Those who weren't injured had been kindly provided jobs in the castle town, and they had started working energetically. From what I'd heard, as the elves protected by the hero who'd turned back the provincial army, they had been received extremely well.

When Senpai heard of this hero talk, his expression had been complicated. It was easy to see how much he disliked the label, but since such rumors had a positive effect on the elves, he probably figured it wasn't a bad thing and refrained from saying anything about it.

That was just the kind of person he was. It was exactly what I— Oh, I went off track. In any case, we'd established a stable life in Aker for now, but that didn't mean we had peace of mind.

The Maclaurin Provincial Army's hostility was sure to be as strong as ever, and we couldn't predict how the Holy Order would act either. We didn't even know what was going to happen next. Things could develop in a good way, or they could all fall apart. No matter how much power we had to protect one another, it was never enough.

Everyone had become so strong, but what about me? When I thought about that, I felt a little gloomy. I hadn't been of much use during our flight from the provincial army. Not that I'd sat idly by; I'd helped treat Senpai as Holy Water assaulted him from the inside out. But I'd only been assisting Lily. It wasn't much of a contribution.

That was how it'd been until now. In essence, all I could do was help others. Hypothesizing every possible situation and working out details that might be of use was nothing more than assisting someone else.

If only I had power, then I could protect everyone more directly. I was weak. I couldn't even walk around town on my own, let alone

face an enemy in battle. To any normal person in this world, my lack of strength was understandable. I was a visitor, though. I was supposed to be able to obtain great power.

Nevertheless, I was powerless and had remained that way all this time. Why was that? I'd always questioned this. Visitors manifested powers from a wish deep in our hearts, but that didn't mean everyone could gain one. If one had no wish, or if one didn't wish for it strongly enough, then no power would manifest.

That was exactly why I found it so weird.

I had no wish? I had one, but I didn't wish for it strongly enough? Impossible.

In truth, I'd been aware of what my wish was for a long time.

How could I not be? I wished for it so much that it hurt. I was certain that I put more weight into my wish than anyone else did into theirs, yet I still couldn't manifest any power.

Really, why was that? Why did I...

No, let's stop there.

Questioning it wouldn't change reality. It'd be one thing if there were any signs that I could fix it, but I hadn't found even the smallest thread leading to such an outcome this entire time. Thinking about it so casually wouldn't bring me the answer. There was still much that we didn't know about these powers to begin with.

I had so many questions about these cheats, or blessings as this world called them. Why could we gain such powers? When we teleported to this world, many of us should've questioned this, but as time passed, all saviors throughout history had come to accept that this was just how things were. It'd been the same for me. I'd even had the chance to learn that it was a physical law in this world.

This was a world where strong wishes came true. If that was how things worked, there was no point in challenging it. No matter how mysterious it seemed, disputing why an apple fell to the ground wouldn't change reality. That was just how laws worked.

Nonetheless, even if I didn't doubt the law, I could still feel that something was odd about it. To put it simply, something felt as if it didn't obey this law. This was probably meaningful in some way, if not terribly important.

I could question this, but I couldn't come up with the answer. If I just changed my perspective a bit, maybe I could figure it out, but I couldn't identify what was wrong. I was at my limit.

Rose and the others seemed to be seriously misunderstanding it. All I ever did was think and think until I derived a conclusion. I wasn't particularly talented or anything, and since my thoughts on the matter were so vague, I couldn't provide advice for anyone even if they asked. It would only confuse them.

This really annoyed me. I couldn't get my thoughts in order. Something felt off. Something was wrong with this world, but what?

The Holy Church extolled saviors.

The Holy Order employed only the saviors' descendants, and those who could reproduce a savior's power were called "beloved of blessed blood."

The people saw the saviors as their emotional pillar.

This world wouldn't be if not for the saviors.

According to the information I knew so far, this was apparently all true. However, if that was the case, why—



"Mana?"

A voice brought me back to my senses. A pile of papers bound by a string sat on the desk in front of me. I was gripping a pen in my hand. The note I'd been writing had become unintelligible halfway through. I raised my head and saw that Rose had stopped working and was staring at me.

"Is something the matter?" she asked with a look of concern. "You're making a frightening expression. It looks as if you've been working on something for a while now."

"Oh. No. I wouldn't call it work or anything," I said in a fluster, shaking my head. "It's like a journal or a notebook or the like. I just write down my thoughts to get them in order... Seems I was concentrating too hard, though."

I tried touching my cheek, and just as Rose said, it felt tight. That was no good. I began massaging my cheeks to relax my tightened muscles. Before long, my emotions calmed down too.

"You're so smart, Mana," Rose said, looking at me in admiration. "I'm sure you notice many things I don't even understand."

She paused there, nodding to herself.

"Still, you mustn't think too hard. Your body isn't very strong, after all," she added considerately before standing up. "Shall we take a little break? My master should be back about now, so I'll prepare some tea."

"Ah, hang on a sec. I'll help too."

I couldn't just let her worry about me all the time. I got up from my chair and followed Rose, then suddenly remembered something and turned around.

My notebook was still open on the desk. In the end, that slight sense of discomfort remained unidentified and out of my reach. Was it just my imagination? Or would the day come when I figured it out? Either way, I couldn't do anything about it now. I closed the notebook, then went after Rose.

Chapter 3: Visitor

“Lord Takahiro.”

After Lily, Lobivia, and I joined the soldiers for training, we returned to the section of the royal palace we were staying in. When we got there, someone called out to me.

“Ella!” Lobivia yelled, reacting before I did. “You’re here! Welcome back!”

“Yes, I’m back,” Ella answered, smiling gently.

She was currently dressed for travel. About a week ago, she and a few of her sisters had left the palace to go to the ruins of Draconia to hold a memorial service for their lost family members. After returning, Ella had immediately found us to report that they were back. Next to her was Philip, who was also dressed for travel, and a knight.

“I have returned, Lord Takahiro,” Ella said. “Has anything been inconveniencing you?”

“No, nothing. I’m fine,” I replied. “Welcome back, Ella. Philip, it’s a relief to see you safe too.”

Aker had accepted the dragons of Draconia as my companions, so the royal family were accommodating them in a few ways. One such accommodation was that Philip had accompanied them on their trip back to Draconia.

Philip was the second prince of Aker, so a knight acting as an escort had accompanied him on this trip, along with a spiritualist elf to detect enemies. This had all been prepared so that even if something had happened, they would’ve been able to get out of trouble. Philip himself claimed that he had less responsibility as the second prince, but going this far was more a sign of his kindness than his station.

When he was captured by the Maclaurin Provincial Army a little over a month ago, Philip had escaped during the uproar my Misty Lodge and the dragons’ arrival had caused. It’d apparently been quite perilous, and during the chaos he’d even lost consciousness. Fortunately, when he woke up, he noticed that his restraints had come undone, so he secretly escaped the panicking provincial army. Because of that, Philip was significantly grateful for the dragons, who’d been the trigger for his getaway.

A friendly relationship between the dragons and Aker’s royalty was a good thing for me too. We still couldn’t predict what the future

had in store for us, so it was important to solidify the ties between our allies.

“Lord Takahiro, I have something to speak with you about. Do you have the time?” Ella said, cutting to the chase now that our greetings were over.

“I don’t mind. Did something happen?” I asked.

Ella’s expression darkened. Philip’s wasn’t any better. It didn’t look like good news.

“Master, how about we talk inside?” Lily suggested.

With that, we all entered the building together. Philip had prepared this section of the palace in secret. Upon entering, we were greeted by the sight of the children from Kehdo and Rapha playing in the lounge. Among them was a giant white spider. Noticing us, she waved energetically.

“Ooh, My Lord. I see you’re all back.”

Depending on the place, traffic could be rather intense in the royal palace, so those of my servants who looked particularly monstrous, like Gerbera, were a little restricted with regards to where they could go. That said, this entire section of the palace was off-limits to others, so we got by without any inconveniences.

“Gerbera, and you too, Katou, can you come with us?” I asked. Katou was also playing with the children.

“Sure thing, Senpai.”

After I called out to the two of them, we headed toward our room. Lily tactfully went to get Rose and the others too. The only one who wasn’t with us was Ayame, which meant she was with Berta, who was also absent.

During our stay here, the two of them often spent time basking in their favorite sun spot. It wasn’t as if Ayame would understand anything even if she participated in our talks, and Berta was an outsider, so it was fine for them to be absent.

One of the palace’s maids brought us drinks, and once she withdrew, Ella got started.

“First, a report. We safely reached the settlement and managed to find most of our siblings’ remains,” she said, looking at me across the table. “Just as planned, we finished the memorial service right there.”

The memorial service had been held with only those who’d accompanied Ella to the settlement. A dragon’s corpse was large and difficult to move, and given enough time, it would decompose even more, so they’d had no other choice. If things settled down a little, I planned to take Lobivia to visit their graves.

“I see. I’m glad nothing serious happened,” I said.

What I’d been most worried about at first was an encounter with visitors, but no such trouble had occurred, which was a great relief.

Ella's expression tensed, however.

"No, about that... There was one problem," she said.

"What happened?"

"We couldn't find the elder's body."

"You mean...Malvina's?" I asked, bewildered by the unexpected news.

Draconia's elder, the carapace wyrm Malvina, was an enormous dragon who measured over fifty meters tall. She was the mother of all of Draconia's dragons. I'd heard she'd died in a ferocious battle against the visitors who'd attacked the settlement, so how could her body not be found?

"That means...the visitors took it or something?" I said as the thought came to mind. "For example, it's possible they wanted to bring it back as a trophy for their triumphant return or something."

"No, I don't believe that's the case," Philip said. "On our way to Draconia, we gathered information related to the attack on the settlement. As a result, we learned that the ones who set out to subjugate the lord of those Dark Woods were saviors who'd accepted a request from a certain town in Longue County."

"At first, they weren't able to make any headway because of the Mist Barrier," I said, having heard this much from Ella before they departed. "Then, in a turn of bad luck, they met up with the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya and broke through, right?"

"After that," Philip continued for me, "the saviors subjugated the dragons, though several of them lost their lives. They then returned to Longue County. Judging that there were no visitors at the settlement anymore, we departed for Draconia."

"If I remember right," I began, "the 'heroic tale' of the visitors who fought bravely at the cost of some of their comrades is spreading all over from Longue County, so it was easy to gather information... Aah, so that's what you mean." After going over it again, I came to a realization. "If they'd brought back Malvina's remains for a triumphant return, that would've been part of the stories."

"Exactly," Philip confirmed. "However, no such stories exist among the information we gathered. Also, I'm told Malvina is an extraordinarily large dragon. It would be no simple task to carry her away, even for a savior."

"That's also true."

In addition, the visitors who'd attacked Draconia hadn't had that kind of time. They'd been somewhat careful, considering the numbers they had gathered to help, but at heart, they weren't all that different from the visitors made out to be the fake savior in the Empire's small eastern provinces. They'd always mowed down their enemies with tremendous powers, living a life with no hardships. Their comrades'

deaths were shocking, and it must've affected them. It was hard to imagine that they'd paused to consider how to bring back a dead dragon the size of a mountain just for a parade. But in that case, why was Malvina's body gone?

"Takahiro," Shiran said to get my attention.

"What is it?" I asked. "You realized something?"

"Yes. Just maybe, Malvina is..." Shiran looked anxiously at Ella and Lobivia, hesitating to finish her sentence.

Ella nodded. "Yes. In all likelihood, I'm thinking the same thing as you."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Ella let out a melancholic sigh, then gathered her thoughts before saying, "It's possible the elder has become an undead monster."

A chair clattered to the floor. Lobivia was standing there stiffly. It was obviously a shock to hear that her mother had turned undead.

"That can't... No, it's more than possible," I said, keeping an eye on Lobivia.

The undead were abandoned corpses that had turned into monsters through mana. In regions where mana was particularly dense, like the Woodlands, undead outbreaks were very common. Also, when humans and monsters died, mana was released into the atmosphere, amplifying the threat even more. The battle had occurred in a detached section of the Woodlands, one of the Dark Woods. With dead dragons and visitors gathered there, it could be said that all the conditions had been in place for this to happen.

"According to our investigation of the battle site," Ella said, "we found traces of mana that can be called the miasma of undead monsters. I believe it's almost a certainty."

She'd been there herself, so the credibility of her claim was fairly high.

"Was Malvina's body the only one that was missing?" I asked, suddenly realizing the possibility.

Earlier, Ella had reported that she'd found most of her siblings' remains. In other words, she hadn't found all of them.

"It's as you suspect," Ella answered. "We couldn't locate one of our brothers either. Rex's body was nowhere to be found."

"Rex too..."

The gigantic man's face came to mind. Rex was Lobivia's brother, and he'd prided himself on his role as the settlement's guardian. During our stay there, he'd flared up whenever it came to Lobivia—though he'd obstinately continued to call her Patricia. Regardless, I didn't think badly of the awkward man. He'd been desperate to protect the settlement. In truth, he'd fought bravely against the visitors who'd attacked Draconia, and he'd died in the process.

“It’s likely that, having turned into undead monsters, the two of them will attack humans,” Ella said, controlling her voice well, though it trembled slightly at the very end.

Her beloved family had been cruelly murdered and were now wandering around as undead shells of themselves. I couldn’t even guess what was going through Ella’s mind. That was to say nothing of her youngest sister, who was white as a sheet.

“Lobivia.”

Unable to stand by and watch, I called her over, and she sat down on my lap and let me hug her. She was cold to the touch.

“Takahiro. Sorry, I...”

“It’s fine. Just stay like this for a bit.”

So much had happened in so short a time that even the normally stubborn Lobivia was deeply affected. Just the fact that she wasn’t crying was worthy of praise.

“Hey...Takahiro,” she said, her voice muffled from pressing her head against my chest. “Can it work out like with Shiran?”

Shiran was also an undead monster. Some time ago, after she’d fallen and turned into a ghoul, I’d managed to pick her back up and restore her ego. That said, circumstances differed this time.

“Even back then, I barely made it in time,” I answered, recalling the events of Fort Tilia. “Her soul was moments away from shattering. Unfortunately, too much time has passed.”

Shiran’s case had miraculously satisfied the right conditions for me to bring her back. Sadly, miracles didn’t occur that often.

“Sorry. I can’t grant your wish,” I said.

“It’s fine...” Lobivia said, shaking her head and pressing against me even harder. “That was unreasonable of me. Sorry.”

With that, she stopped talking, and silence fell over the room for a while.

“Forgive me, Takahiro,” Philip eventually said. “Considering my position, I must take into account my people’s safety. If Malvina has turned into an undead monster and attacks a town...”

His voice conveyed a solemn sense of duty.

“I know,” I said, nodding. “Malvina wouldn’t wish for that either.”

“I’m glad you understand.”

“We dragons of Draconia also plan on fulfilling our responsibilities,” Ella added from his side. “Above all else...we must grant the elder her due rest.”

“You’re right. When that time comes, we’ll help too,” I said.

“Thank you very much. However, you have other things you must do, Lord Takahiro. Please have Lobivia help on that front as well.”

Ella lowered her head. She was probably making this request with Lobivia in mind. It would be far too heavy a burden to have the little

dragon fight her undead mother when their relationship had been left in such a complicated state. I agreed on that front, so I nodded back.

“Also, about the Dimensional Cornerstone that maintained the Mist Barrier,” Ella continued, “we couldn’t find it either. I don’t know whether it was broken or taken away, but that must be why the Mist Barrier vanished.”

With that one gone, the one remaining Dimensional Cornerstone in the dragons’ possession was the one Thaddeus carried around on his travels. Even with Salvia around, the Mist Barrier couldn’t be reestablished right away.

Just in case, I’d used the contact routes Thaddeus had taught us to inform him of the attack on Draconia, but I still hadn’t gotten a reply. This method couldn’t get a message across right away, and depending on Thaddeus’s current location, it could take even longer, so there wasn’t much I could do to speed things along. That said, recreating the Mist Barrier and shutting themselves in again would be fairly risky at this point, so either way, it was safest for the dragons to live in Aker for now.

“That is all I have to report,” Ella said, letting out a sigh as if a load had been lifted off her shoulders.

“What about you, Takahiro?” Philip asked. “Has anything happened in our absence?”

“Right, there’s one thing we have to talk about,” I answered. Now it was our turn. I took a sip of tea, then cut to the chase. “You might’ve caught wind of this on your way here, but...a message came from the Holy Church.”

“From the church?” Philip said, his expression tensing. “No, we came straight here, so we haven’t had the opportunity to hear of it. What did it say?”

“They’re inviting us to the imperial capital. It says they want to hold talks to call for an armistice between us and the margrave.”

After we’d recovered Rose, the Maclaurin Provincial Army had been annihilated. We’d received this news shortly after Aker’s army granted us and the reclamation villages’ elves protection. We’d been in the middle of discussing how to deal with the provincial army, so we’d doubted our ears when we first heard.

According to what Aker’s army got out of the few survivors, a swarm of tripdrills had attacked them. Nevertheless, this didn’t mean the margrave had given up on subjugating me. In fact, even after the exploration team protested it, the margrave hadn’t withdrawn his stance on the matter.

He’d lost so many soldiers, so I doubted he had many spares to put into action, but we couldn’t be careless. A number of nobles still supported him, so if they all worked together to gather a new army,

they could possibly dispatch another force.

Compounding that issue, they'd gathered enough influence to place sanctions on Aker. Stopping the flow of goods was all it took to force a small country like Aker into a difficult position. Aker's other allies, especially those of the Five Northern Kingdoms, were making moves to support us, so that allowed us to get by, but the situation was dire enough that this would be hard to recover from. At worst, this entire region—or maybe the entire world—would end up in a cold war where everyone was either friend or foe.

The Holy Church's proposal provided a possibility of averting this outcome. Philip understood this immediately.

"That's not a bad offer, in my opinion," he said.

"Yes, I think so too," I agreed. "We can't remain at odds with the margrave forever. That is, assuming we can trust the Holy Church."

Philip's breath caught in his throat for a moment, but I'd expected this reaction.

"Assuming we can trust the Holy Church,' you say? I never even thought of that," he said.

"That's pretty much the case for any resident of this world."

"But not for you," Philip said before taking a short breath. "To protect what you hold dear, you must always decide whether you can trust what is before your eyes. We must do the same. The world has become like that. We too need to put more thought into what is worthy of our trust."

I heard the firm determination in his voice. He didn't look much like his sister, but in times like this, he really did remind me of the commander of the Alliance Knights who'd fought shoulder to shoulder with us at Fort Tilia. Gaining an ally like him was one of the few fortunes we'd come across in this world.

Just then, someone knocked on the door, and our conversation came to a momentary halt.

"Excuse me," said one of the soldiers in charge of this section's security as he entered the room. "Forgive the intrusion. You have a visitor, so I brought her here."

"A visitor? Takahiro, were you planning to meet someone?" Philip asked.

"No, I'm pretty sure I wasn't..." I answered, knitting my brow.

Taking into account our future, we'd created plenty of opportunities to meet important Akerian figures, so having a visitor wasn't all that strange. We'd had no such plans for today, though.

"Senpai."

Katou called out to me cautiously, and Lily was already on guard and half on her feet. That was when a voice came from the hallway.

"Aah, it's okay now. I'll take it from here."

It was a girl's voice. The refreshing ring to it was familiar.

"It can't be..." I murmured.

A slender girl came into the room, her long hair fluttering behind her. Upon seeing her face, my eyes went as wide as saucers.

"Iino?"

"Long time no see," the Skanda Iino Yuna replied awkwardly.

Chapter 4: Messenger

“Why’re you all the way out here?”

I’d never thought I’d see Iino here, so the first thing to come out of my mouth was that suspicious question.

Hearing the distrust in my voice, Iino gave me a petulant look. “That’s quite the greeting, Majima. Am I not allowed to be here?”

“That’s not what I mean, but...”

If we were close friends, this might be where I rejoiced at our unexpected reunion, but we didn’t really have that kind of relationship. Regardless, maybe I’d been just a little too rude.

“Sorry ’bout that,” I said. “I didn’t mean anything by it. So? Didn’t you go back to the exploration team?”

“I did. That’s why I’m here.”

Iino still looked a little offended. She was being crabby. Well, thinking back on it, she was always like that. In that case, there was no point taking her mood into consideration.

“I don’t get it. How’s that follow?” I asked.

“Master, how about letting her sit down first?” Lily cut in. “There’s no reason she has to stand while talking, and we need to introduce Iino to the others too.”

Iino and I exchanged glances.

“You’ve got a point there. Take a seat,” I said.

“Okay, I will,” Iino said.

“Very well, then please sit here,” Ella said, yielding her place across from me.

“Umm, thank you.”

Ella bowed expressionlessly to Iino, then moved over. As she did, Philip ordered the soldier who’d come with Iino to prepare another cup. He was usually rather candid, but at times like this, he gave off an air of royalty.

Iino took a seat, then blinked curiously.

“Uhh, what’s wrong?” she asked, looking at Lobivia, who was still in my arms.

I looked down at her too. Lobivia seemed strangely expressionless.

“Hey...Takahiro. Who the hell is this?”

Now that I thought of it, Lobivia didn’t know Iino either. She stared at Iino, her eyes slightly widened. Her tail swayed about, and her torn wings stretched out a little. She snuggled closer to me, her

fingers somewhat stiff as she gripped my shirt. She'd transformed a little more into a dragon, ready for anything to happen.

I didn't mind her being on guard, but the atmosphere Lobivia was giving off was a little alarming. If things took a wrong turn, she was liable to leap into action. She was high strung because of recent events, so seeing Iino in such a foul mood had made her even warier than necessary.

This was normal for any of my interactions with Iino, and we were both guilty of being a little rude. It didn't bother me, but Lobivia's reaction was understandable if she didn't know any of this.

"It's okay, Lobivia," Katou said just as I grasped the situation and was about to say something. She was really tactful at times like this. "This is Iino Yuna. She's a visitor from the same world as us. A lot happened before, so her relationship with Senpai is a bit tenuous, and it's hard to tell whether they get along or not. She's not an enemy."

"We don't get along, so don't say weird stuff," Iino retorted.

Lobivia hesitantly looked up at me and asked, "She's not an enemy?"

"Nope. It's okay."

"See? Majima-senpai says so too," Katou added with a smile, before glancing at Iino. "At the very least, she won't attack us out of nowhere, right?"

"I won't..." Iino said, sounding downcast. She did have a prior offense in this regard. Or maybe she was just bad at dealing with Katou.

Seeing Iino like this, Lobivia was now convinced and gave Iino a brisk nod, but she still remained glued to me. That was when the cup Philip had asked for arrived. With everything in place, I continued our conversation.

"So, Iino, you must have some business with us to come all the way out here, right?"

"Yes, I do," Iino answered honestly, her spirits dampened by the earlier exchange. The next words out of her mouth had quite the impact, though. "I've come at the Holy Church's request."

"The church?" I repeated.

The atmosphere in the room tensed. We'd just been discussing the church, so our reaction was to be expected.

"Yes. I was asked to convince you," Iino said, looking deadly serious.

"You were?" I asked incredulously.

"You have a problem with that?"

"Not really. Just checking."

Iino glared at me and pouted. Honestly, she seemed like the wrong person for the job.

“Could it be...?” Katou suddenly muttered.

“What’s up, Katou?” I asked.

“I always found it strange that the exploration team publicly declared their objections to the margrave’s actions,” she said, folding a finger against her lip. “Iino, did you get the exploration team to do that?”

“What?” I uttered.

“I mean, if that’s how it happened, then it makes sense why she was the one sent here.”

I turned my eyes to Iino, and she smiled slightly.

“You’re half-right,” Iino said. “I did inform the exploration team of your circumstances, but our leader made the decision... I couldn’t do anything on my own.”

Those last words came out in a quiet murmur.

“Iino?” I stared at her curiously. Her smile seemed so unsuitably bitter for her. “Something wrong?”

“It’s nothing.” Iino shook her head. Maybe something had happened, but she wasn’t going to talk about it. “Anyway, you better thank our leader,” she added bluntly, returning to her usual demeanor. “Once he learned what was going on, he immediately decided to act. He’s not the type to abandon any visitor, and apparently he’d had you on his mind for quite a while too.”

“Your leader... By that, you mean Nakajima Kojirou?” I asked, a little bewildered. “Why would he care about me?”

“Who knows? That guy likes people who give it their all, so it’s probably something like that. That’s just how he is. He believes in everyone and keeps looking to the future.”

Iino seemed somehow proud of that. Things hadn’t been perfect, but he had brought together a thousand people in the middle of a catastrophe, when we’d suddenly ended up in another world. At the time, I’d been no more than one among that huge crowd, but the exploration team members who worked with him directly surely all admired him.

“Well, I’m grateful that he protested the margrave’s actions for me,” I said.

“Yup. You better thank him. You should also thank the mystery man who informed me of the danger you were in.”

“What mystery man?”

“I have no idea,” Iino answered, shrugging. “I met him in Bann Viscounty. He told me that the Maclaurin Provincial Army was after you. I figured he was someone you knew.”

“I can’t really comment with so little information. Where’s Bann Viscounty, anyway?”

“It’s a small province in the eastern Empire. I don’t have more

information than that. He hid his face. Oh. Now that I think of it, he used a spear.”

“That’s not much to go on...”

“Also, he was kind of a creep.”

So, as fellow people she hated, maybe this guy got along with me.

All jokes aside, none of this rang a bell. Iino seemed to understand this, so she paid it no mind and moved on.

“Anyway, I was related to this whole thing because of that, so I was asked to come here to try and convince you.”

“I’ve got the gist of it,” I said, nodding, then got to my main question. “But *who* asked you? The church is more than one person, right?”

“An archbishop of the Holy Church, Lord Gerd Kruger, and the Holy Order’s marshal, Sir Harrison Addington. I was called to the imperial capital to meet them.”

“Those are some pretty big names...”

Both held such a high status that everybody in the world knew their names. The church had six archbishops, and Gerd Kruger sat at their head. I’d obviously heard of the Holy Order’s marshal too.

These two were the symbols of the greatest influence and martial might in the world. If they were making moves, it was safe to assume that they were seriously trying to get this situation under control. The problem was *how* they were planning to do so.

“I heard about Travis,” Iino said. “I think it’s reasonable for you to distrust the Holy Order.”

She was understanding of our plight. She looked mortified, actually. Maybe she was remembering how Travis had tricked her into attacking me. Her lips were pulled tight.

“However, Lord Gerd and Sir Harrison are different,” she continued. “They believe something must be done about all this. That’s why they’re planning to hold a discussion to address it.”

“That sounds good on paper...but I don’t really get it,” I said, grimacing. “Can’t the Holy Church just order Margrave Maclaurin to put an end to this fight? Why are they being so roundabout?”

“They said they could get the margrave to do whatever they asked. However, that isn’t what the Holy Church considers the main problem,” Iino said, shaking her head calmly. “Many people approve of the margrave’s claims. This is no longer just the margrave’s problem. What has really complicated things is that, regardless of the exploration team’s...of the saviors’ protests, those people still support the margrave. They believe justice lies with him.”

“Because of Travis, you mean...”

“That’s right. Nobody knows that Travis acted independently. Many believe the margrave’s claim is backed by the Holy Order, or the

church as a whole. With the exploration team's protest, things have developed into a quarrel between saviors and the church. That's why they want to reach a reconciliation. In short, settling things between you and Margrave Maclaurin will be equivalent to reconciliation between the saviors and the Holy Church."

Iino answered with unexpected fluidity. She'd likely expected these questions from me and had prepared proper answers beforehand.

"I see," I said. "Will the margrave go along with it?"

"I told you they can make him do what they say, right?" Iino answered. "The two of them promised that they'd get the margrave to agree to an armistice. All that's left is to reconcile, even if only for show. That's more than enough."

"Ummm, so what you're saying is..." Lily joined in, "the church will keep the margrave under control, and in return, they want us to go along with their little performance? That's why they want us in the imperial capital?"

"That's basically it," Iino answered. "In this case, these talks are a kind of ceremony, so holding them in the imperial capital will yield the greatest results. That's why they invited Majima there. In exchange, the church will prepare everything necessary to hold the talks, and will even take responsibility for the armistice. It sounds like a pretty good deal to me, at least."

"Hmm. That's a nice way of putting it," Lily said, "but things got this bad because of the Holy Order's mismanagement in the first place. It's as if they're telling us to help them clean up their own mess."

Lily sounded as though she was testing Iino. It was important to make a clear distinction as to where any responsibility lay. If these talks were executed poorly, we might end up in their debt and have to go along with disadvantageous conditions. In other words, she was asking what the Holy Church's stance was on this entire matter.

"The two of them are also aware of this," Iino said, quickly admitting to what Lily was getting at. Fortunately, the church seemed to have no intention of putting us in their debt and had given Iino detailed information in that regard. "That's why they want you to inform them if you have any conditions for attending the talks. I do, of course, have to go tell them so that they can consider your conditions, but it seems they're ready to go along with anything so long as it isn't too outrageous."

"Hmm. So that's their stance?" Lily said, looking my way. Her eyes were asking me what we should do.

Honestly, the church was being more sincere with us than I'd expected. They weren't acting high-handedly or trying to take advantage of us. It seemed they were trying to restore the damaged

trust between us.

From our perspective, much like we'd discussed already, we couldn't remain at odds with Margrave Maclaurin forever. So long as they could be deemed trustworthy, I wasn't entirely against going along with this proposal.

"I understand," I said. "Once our conditions are met, we can head for the imperial capital."

"I see. That's good," Iino said, a ring of relief in her voice. She'd probably been worried about whether I'd accept. "Okay then, about what comes next."

She took a sip of tea, then pulled out some violet gems from a magic bag. Three of the spheres tumbled onto the table.

"Teleportation runestones?" I asked.

"Oh, you know of them?"

"Travis's group used them. I don't know how they work, though."

"These are a relic from a past savior. They're a valuable magic tool that the Holy Church keeps in their possession. Each comes as a pair, allowing a person to jump from one to the other. They can only be used once, but the church has judged this to be an emergency and offered these to us."

They worked pretty much as I'd expected, although I hadn't known that they were single-use items.

"So? What're those for?" I asked.

"The day after tomorrow, Shimazu will come here using these."

"Shimazu... You mean the Fairy Ring Shimazu Yui, the teleportation cheater of the exploration team?"

"Yup. Shimazu's ability prevents her from going anywhere she hasn't been herself, so she's using these runestones to get here. By doing so, we can use her Fairy Ring to go back. That's actually how I got all the way to Serrata. I ran the rest of the way here, though."

Normally, that route would take someone over a month, but that didn't apply to Iino. One of the reasons the Skanda had been chosen for this role was likely her overwhelming speed. What's more, once her ability's restrictive conditions were met, the Fairy Ring surpassed the Skanda in terms of travel speed.

"So the Fairy Ring is in Serrata?" I asked. "She's gonna use a runestone to make the jump all the way here?"

"Nope. That's too far. There's a limit to these things. The church gave us five pairs, and I handed them off at specific points as I made my way here. One pair is a spare, so there're four jump points. If this one here is A, then A's pair is at the point before this with B, and B's pair is at the point before that."

"Four pairs for this? Aren't these really valuable?"

"That's how serious the church is about this."

One could say that was how much they feared the current state of affairs. In truth, the longer this went on, the more unstable the political landscape would become. For example, if some noble independently raised an army, things could get even more chaotic. It was better to resolve this as quickly as possible.

“Shimazu’s ability also has limits, but unlike these runestones, she can take multiple people with her, and she can keep jumping as many times as she likes. Unfortunately, the more people she takes along, and the longer each jump, the more exhausting it is. Still, it’s way faster than traveling normally. If she takes twenty or so people with her, she estimates it’ll take us seven days to reach the imperial capital.”

A normal trip from Aker to the heart of the Empire would take over four months. Shimazu’s ability was absurdly efficient, but that was pretty much normal for cheaters.

“As for our current plan, once Shimazu gets here, she’ll take me back to the imperial capital first to convey your conditions,” Iino continued. “It’s not much of a burden if I’m the only one going along for the ride, so she can do multiple jumps a day to get there quickly. The one-way trip will take about three days. The Holy Church is already calling the margrave to the capital, but it’ll take him about a month to arrive. During that time, the church will comply with your conditions. Once that’s done, I’ll come back to Aker with Shimazu and take you to the imperial capital. On our way there, we’ll also have escorts from the Holy Order. So how about it?”

“I understand how it’ll work out. I don’t have any complaints.”

“That’s good.” With that, Iino stretched her limbs. “For now, that’s all I have to say. If you don’t have any more questions, I need to excuse myself and find an inn for the night.”

“Just one,” I said. “About our conditions, do you mind if we discuss it among ourselves first?”

“Sure. Shimazu doesn’t get here until the day after tomorrow, anyway. Take your time and think it over,” Iino said, relaxing her shoulders now that this part of her job was done.

“About looking for an inn,” Philip said. “Would you prefer to stay in the palace during your visit? I can prepare a room for you.”

“Really? That saves me the trouble of looking. I ran all the way here, so I’m beat.”

Iino didn’t seem to be lying; she truly looked tired. It was rather unusual. She was the type to steel herself and hide such things in front of others. Maybe she was just that exhausted. Her expression was far less determined than usual too.

“In that case, allow me to guide you to your room,” Philip said.

“Thank you very much.”

Philip rose from his seat with Iino in tow.

“Iino,” I said, calling her to a stop before she left. She turned around. “Thanks. You really saved us by going out of your way to tell the exploration team about the danger we were in and coming all the way here.”

“Whatever... I don’t need your thanks,” she said, the usual sharpness back in her eyes. “I just can’t forgive injustice. That’s all.”

“I know. You’re fair to everyone. Even to someone you hate.”

I smiled wryly. Even if it wasn’t me in this position, Iino would’ve exhausted all her strength to try and save them. She hadn’t done it for my sake. That was simply how she was. She possessed everything I’d given up on. That was why I was jealous of her and why she grated on my nerves. That was why I had no choice but to acknowledge her.

“I get it,” I said, “but you still saved us, so I want to thank you.”

After a few seconds of silence, Iino let out a “Hmph.” She hated me, but seeing her back to her normal self was somehow a relief.

With nothing else to say, Iino left the room with Philip.

Chapter 5: The Girl's Lack of Courage

~Katou Mana's POV~

Dawn broke on the morning after Iino's sudden visit as I headed to breakfast with Rose.

"Did you not get enough sleep?" Rose asked as I stifled a yawn. "You seemed to have problems resting last night."

"Just a little... I was going over whether we overlooked anything in the conditions we picked for going to the Empire, so I had trouble sleeping."

We'd discussed it plenty as a group during the day. We had our conditions for the Holy Church ready. All that was left was to tell Iino and wait for the other party's response.

"Ah."

As Rose and I walked down the corridor, we bumped into Iino. She apparently wanted to get things moving first thing in the morning.

"Katou..." The moment she saw my face, her steps faltered. "Morning."

"Good morning," I replied, pretending not to notice how awkward she was being. "Did you come to hear our conditions?"

"Yes, that's right. Are they maybe not quite ready yet? If so, I can come back later."

"I think they're ready. We talked it over yesterday."

"Ah, okay."

"If you drop by, Majima-senpai will tell you. He should be heading for breakfast after finishing his morning training. We're also on the way there. Want to come with us?"

"Sounds good."

Iino's face looked a little stiff. I'd noticed this before, but it seemed she didn't know how to deal with me. Well, I had in fact stabbed her in the leg before, so it made sense. I wasn't the type to strike up idle conversation with someone like her either.

"Then let's go," I said.

"Ah, hang on a sec."

I started walking immediately, but Iino called me to a stop. Finding this odd, I turned around.

"What is it?" I asked.

"U-Um, you know, there's something I wanna ask you."

"Me?"

Now that was unusual. Until now, Iino and I had barely spoken to each other. At most, we'd talked at that strategy meeting for defeating Takaya, and we'd bantered briefly before I stabbed her. What curious turn of events made her want to ask me something? I returned her look with a suspicious one of my own, and Iino got right to it.

"It's about Majima."

"What about Majima-senpai...?"

I unintentionally narrowed my eyes. My wariness came to the fore. She'd gone out of her way to ask me, whom she pretty much never got involved with, about Majima-senpai. She must've been fishing for something. From how things went yesterday, Iino was here at the church's request, but she was acting like a third party to mediate between us. She didn't give off the impression that the church was conspiring with the margrave and that she was in on it. That said, there was no guarantee that this wasn't the case.

"What is it?" I asked.

For the time being, it was best to analyze her behavior, so I urged the conversation forward while studying her with the utmost care. Iino then averted her gaze for some reason. She was usually brisk and to the point, but she spoke falteringly, albeit rapidly.

"Um, yesterday, he had a little girl in his arms, right? I was just wondering how she was related to him."

"What?"

Her question went so far beyond my expectations that I unintentionally raised my voice. Paying my reaction no mind, Iino continued.

"They looked really close. I mean, I don't think it's the case, but just maybe..."

"You think they're romantically involved?"

"Y-Yeah!"

Iino braced herself, which clued me in on her feelings. She apparently had apprehensions...or not? What even was this?

"There's no way they are, right?" I answered, sighing. I felt drained after having prepared myself so seriously. "I'm pretty sure you can guess since she wasn't hiding her tail and wings, but Lobivia is Majima-senpai's new servant. I'll leave out the details, but she's half human too. Senpai is like her guardian, so she's really attached to him. That's all."

"That's all?"

"Yes, it is."

"I see... That's fine, then," Iino said, looking truly relieved.

On instinct, I looked at her with suspicion. "Why do you look a little happy?"

"I-I'm not," Iino answered with a start. She was so easy to

understand. "It's true. If I look that way, it's because... Right. I'm sure it's because I know he hasn't laid his hands on a little girl."

She tried to gloss it over, but that didn't seem to be what really bothered her. Deep in my chest, I felt a prickling sensation. It was a crude emotion I usually never harbored, and I didn't let it show.

And as I got myself under control, Rose cocked her head next to me.

"It's just as Mana says. Lobivia isn't someone my master is romantically involved with now. That would be Gerbera and Shiran."

She said it one hundred percent out of goodwill but without understanding things at all. Rose was so cute like that. Iino, on the other hand, was stiff as a log.

"Huh?"

Her mouth popped open, and a befuddled sound came out. Looking for confirmation, she turned my way.

"Huh?" she repeated.

"It's true," I answered, nodding. There was nothing to hide after all this time. "The same goes for Rose here too."

"H-Hearing that from someone else's mouth makes me feel self-conscious about it," Rose said, casting her eyes down bashfully. She was super cute like this too, and perhaps this was the finishing blow.

"Rose too..." Iino muttered, staggering. Or so I thought, but she suddenly turned toward me at quite literally imperceptible speed. "D-Don't tell me, you too?!"

"Iino, Iino. I'm going to get blown away just from the wind you cause when you turn around like that. It's seriously scary for normal people, so please cut it out."

"Are you?!"

"I'm not."

"Ah... Is that so?" she said, clearly relieved. "I see. But Rose and the others too..."

Her gaze fell to the floor. I thought she'd get angry, claiming it was indecent, but she didn't. Maybe it was best to say that she didn't have the capacity to consider getting angry.

Iino started walking off unsteadily, half in a daze.

"Iino? Where are you going?" I asked.

"Sorry. I just remembered something I have to do. I'll come back again later..."

She then left. She didn't even seem to be thinking of us anymore.

"Mana, shouldn't we stop her?" Rose asked.

"Just leave her be," I answered, sighing.

It was pretty much a guarantee now. I'd been wondering whether it was the case for a while, but it seemed Iino was interested in Majima-senpai. Not that she'd admit it, though. Well, she wasn't going

to forget why she was here to begin with, and she wasn't that irresponsible by nature. We could just tell her our conditions before the end of the day. It was best to wait for her to calm down for now.

"If you say so, Mana," Rose said, a curious look still on her face. "Still, I wonder what happened to her. Was that conversation just now that shocking for a visitor?"

"No, that's not it..." It was more of a shock to her personally than to visitors as a whole.

That was when I realized something.

"Now that you mention it," I said, "Iino didn't seem that put off by it, but other visitors might not think too highly of it."

"Really?"

"Yes. When we go to the imperial capital, we'll likely meet visitors from the exploration team. Even if we don't spread the news that you're all in love, having so many female companions can leave a bad impression. Remember what happened with Fukatsu before?"

"Aah, come to think of it..."

All the visitors of the exploration team were cheaters; they all had terrifying power. According to Iino, their leader had a favorable impression of Majima-senpai, but the rest were unaccounted for. It was probably best to get rid of any seeds that could sprout into trouble wherever possible.

"We should avoid trouble as much as we can. It might be best to adjust the male-to-female ratio of who goes along. I'll consult Majima-senpai about it later."

"Mana."

"What is it?" I asked casually, pausing my thoughts of the future and turning to look at her. She was making a more serious expression than I expected.

"Did something happen between you and Iino?"

The sudden question brought my thoughts to a complete halt.

"Why do you think that?" I asked, staring at Rose's face.

"Just now, when Iino questioned you about my master, for an instant, it looked like you knitted your brow."

Rose had a good eye. I'd meant to keep it from showing, but she had still noticed. She was reading too much into it, but she looked a little worried, so I put on a slight smile for her.

"Nothing really happened with Iino. This is my own problem."

"Your own problem?"

"I just have a, how to put it...a particular opinion of Iino."

As I spoke, I felt my cheeks getting a little hot. Anyone would find it embarrassing to talk about their own inadequacies. That was all this was.

"I talked about her with Majima-senpai before. According to him,

Iino has everything he'd given up on."

This had happened after we rescued Lily from Takaya, just before parting ways with Iino, who'd helped out due to the flow of events.

"When I see someone who has everything I've had to give up on, I can't possibly think nothing of it... That's why I hate her... It's also why I want her to keep going. I want her to see things through like that to the end. Somewhere inside me, I truly want that for her."

"In a different sense from you and his other servants, I believe Iino is very special to Majima-senpai. That's why..."

"You're more aware of her?" Rose suggested.

"It's a pretty childish and crude reason, though."

Despite knowing this, I couldn't do anything about it—even more so when it involved something so very important to me.

"Pretty embarrassing, huh?" I said.

I slapped my flushed cheeks a few times. Rose stared at me as if her eyes were trying to see through the core of my very being.

"My master considers her someone special, you say?" Rose asked, nodding in agreement before cocking her head again. "So is this because you're in love with my master?"

My breath caught in my throat. Rose was looking at me with a deadly serious expression. It reminded me of that conversation we'd had some time ago on the cliff overlooking Fort Tilia. Her earnestness now was the same as back then, yet Rose had grown so much since.

"Rose..."

"You're in love with him, right?"

She said it with conviction. This was a surprising amount of progress from those days when she'd said that she had no understanding of the human heart. As someone who'd been watching her growth all this time, this was somehow deeply moving. I even felt as if she'd overtaken me in a sense. I suppose because it was Rose, this actually felt refreshing.

"Yes," I said, nodding back to her with mysteriously little resistance. "You're right, Rose. Majima-senpai is—" That said, it was too embarrassing to say it myself. "Well, that's how it is."

"Unlike how I was before, you're aware of it, yes? Then why haven't you told him?"

"Gerbera said something similar to me before."

To be precise, she'd asked me why "I hadn't pounced on him yet." That was an outrageous question, but her wording cut straight to the core of the matter. Gerbera was like that every once in a while.

In truth, Majima-senpai acted in a way so that I wouldn't be scared of him as a man. He did so because I still suffered from androphobia. I knew that. Even so, I couldn't make a move. I was too scared to.

“Rose. It’s not that I haven’t told him. I *can’t* tell him.”

“Why not?”

“Some time ago, I gave up on anything and everything, but you told me that I couldn’t give up. I changed a little, and thanks to that, I didn’t have to part ways with Majima-senpai. Now, he’s granted me his trust as one of his companions.”

I put a hand to my chest. Sensing a certain warmth within, I continued speaking.

“I think I’m happy now, but that just makes breaking this happiness all the more frightening.”

I had given up on absolutely everything, so what I’d gained was just that much more precious to me. If I confessed, it was possible that I would shatter what I’d finally achieved.

“If that’s going to happen, I figure it’s better I ignore this emotion.”

“I understand your wanting to keep what you gained,” Rose said.

“I understand your treating it dearly. I also know very well how you cherish a small piece of happiness more than any other.”

Yet she still followed up with a question.

“However, are you really fine with that, Mana?”

If only I was able to answer, “Even so, I’m fine with it,” life would be so much simpler. I couldn’t say it, though. When I thought of how my feelings would remain unconveyed for all eternity, my heart hurt so much. It made me helplessly sad, and that was so hard to endure. The pain was my answer to Rose’s question. Had that not been the case, I wouldn’t have had those feelings about Iino in the first place.

“You’re right... I can’t say I’m fine with it,” I said, sighing heavily. “I can’t stand being unable to convey my feelings, yet I don’t have the courage to tell him either.”

Uncertain and foolish—that was who I was at my core. It was pathetic.

“I’m weak,” I said with a self-deprecating smile.

“Please don’t make that face, Mana,” Rose said, taking my hand.

“Rose...”

She cradled my hand in hers. The sensation felt so gentle.

“Mana, I don’t know what the best course of action is,” she said, staring right into my eyes. “I can’t tell you what you should do, but please at least remember this.” She put on a smile that nobody would ever believe came from a puppet. “I’m your ally, Mana. If there is anything I can do to help, I’ll do it. Your happiness is a blessing to me.”

I recalled the words she’d said to me before.

“Please live. Please be happy. There’s no way my story can have a happy ending if you don’t get one as well, now is there?”

“Please let me pray for my friend’s fortune. Please show me your own happiness. I don’t want a happy ending where you’re not there with me, Mana.”

Rose had told me that my happiness was a necessity for her own happiness. That was how I’d decided to keep going. Now, she was doing it again.

“It’ll be all right. My beloved Mana is the type to keep pushing forward even when she’s frightened.”

She was overestimating me. I wasn’t strong. But if Rose believed in me, I felt as if I could be just a little stronger.

“You’re right...” Before I knew it, I was nodding. “I think I’ll try just a little harder.”

Chapter 6: Ever-Changing Days

After waking up early in the morning and finishing her usual training, Kei returned to her room. She stripped off her training gear, now slightly heavier with sweat, soaked a cloth in a bucket of water she'd prepared beforehand, and wiped off the dirt and sweat from her skin. After quickly bathing, she changed into her everyday clothes and left her room.

Kei's life in Aker's capital was half as Majima Takahiro's attendant and half as the representative of the former village of Kehdo. Kehdo and its neighbor Rapha had been destroyed by the Maclaurin Provincial Army. In the Woodlands, abandoned villages were quickly engulfed by trees, so it was extremely difficult to restore them.

The survivors of the Holy Order's attack on Kehdo were few in number, so now that the village was gone, there was no need to split the residents up. It had been decided to gather everyone under Leah's lead. Still, Kei was the daughter of Kehdo's chief family, so they couldn't leave absolutely everything to Leah either. To give some peace of mind to Kehdo's former residents, Kei followed Leah and her helper Helena around. Recently, the allotment of jobs the kingdom had kindly provided to the elves had finally been completed, so she had a little more free time now.

"Ah."

Upon leaving her room, Kei accidentally cried out. On the other side of the corridor, she spotted someone she knew.

"Miss Iino...? I wonder what she's doing," Kei murmured to herself.

Iino Yuna appeared to be walking unsteadily. She acted as if she was drunk, and if not that, as if she'd lost control of herself after receiving a major shock. But what could have shocked the Skanda to such an extent? Kei found this curious, but either way, she couldn't leave her like that. However, just when she'd decided to talk to Iino, someone else spoke first.

"Hey, Iino Yuna."

Kei hadn't noticed her until she spoke. Berta was lying down in the garden facing the corridor.

Hearing her name, Iino Yuna came back to her senses.

"Oh, Berta. Long time no see."

Iino returned Berta's greeting with unexpectedly good humor.

Thinking this was a strange pairing, Kei suddenly stopped and eavesdropped on their conversation. Berta's master, the Lord of Darkness Kudou Riku, was openly antagonistic toward the exploration team. Normally, his servants wouldn't be able to hold a conversation with Iino Yuna. It was different for these two, though. After all, they'd cooperated with each other to get Lily back from Takaya Jun. They apparently saw each other as acquaintances, so even Berta was able to speak with Iino without any apprehensions.

"What's with you?" Berta asked. "It's dangerous to stagger around like that. Did something happen?"

"N-Nope, nothing. I was just taking a walk..." Iino answered, looking horribly shaken.

It sounded like she was trying to brush it off, but Kei could only hear it as a poor excuse made up on the spot. The same went for Berta, who had a dubious look in her eyes. After letting her gaze wander for a while, Iino tried to stop any follow-up questions.

"It's really nothing. It's just... Oh yeah, did you know, Berta?"

"Know what?"

"That Majima is, um, in a relationship with Rose and the others."

"Aah, of course I do... Did hearing about it agitate you?"

"Huh? N-No. Wh-Why would it? I don't get why you would say that," Iino replied rapidly. "Well, if he were irresponsibly laying his hands on girls like a big flirt, then I'd have something to say as a fellow visitor. At this point, though, I know he's not that kind of person. There's no reason for it to bother me, so I don't think anything of it. Nothing at all."

No matter how Kei looked at it, Iino was clearly thinking a lot about it. Although, it seemed the person in question wasn't conscious of this.

Berta looked at Iino somewhat pitifully, but before she could say anything, Iino spoke again to change the topic.

"Forget that. What're you up to, Berta?"

"Nothing really. I have nothing to do, so I'm just babysitting."

Curled up against Berta's belly, Ayame let out a long "Kuuu." She lazily opened an eye and looked at Iino Yuna, but seeing that nothing was going on, she closed her eye and went back to sleep. Once in a while, her ears flapped about and her nose twitched. Even to Kei, who had many opportunities to be with Ayame, the little blowfox was so cute that it made her want to glomp her right away.

Perhaps feeling the same urge, Iino Yuna trembled. "I-I wonder whether she'll let me ruffle her fur..."

"Give it up," Berta said. "Ayame sees you as no more than 'that girl who bullied my master.'"

"Will she nom on me?"

“She’s still a monster. Don’t blame me if she bites off your finger.”

As expected, Iino Yuna didn’t want to have her finger bitten off, so she withdrew the hand she’d been slowly reaching out toward Ayame. Seeing Iino’s shoulders droop, Berta stifled a chuckle.

In any case, it looked as though Berta and Ayame were basking in the sun. Kei knew that the two of them often spent time like this. Lying down on a bed of grass with some good exposure to the sun did look comfortable.

Unexpectedly, in contrast to her large body and bizarre features, this suited Berta. It was enough for Kei to secretly wonder whether this kind of peaceful lifestyle suited Berta more than fighting did. Despite knowing that Berta was a subordinate of the Lord of Darkness, Kei still felt that way.

After watching them to that point, Kei got back on track. If she stayed here too long, she would be late for work, so she decided it would be fine to leave Iino Yuna to Berta.

“Miss Iino, hmm...?” Kei murmured to herself as she walked.

Iino Yuna had brought news from the Holy Church just one day prior. To Majima Takahiro and Aker, this was a trigger that would allow them to break the current deadlock. Certainly they needed to proceed carefully, but this opportunity was one worthy of serious consideration. That was how Kei saw it. Therefore, she understood that Iino Yuna’s visit was a good thing.

However, when she thought of this, Kei pursed her lips tight. She didn’t think poorly of Iino Yuna or anything, but Kei had come to an understanding. Things were moving and were sure to change. In other words, these days would soon come to an end.



Today, Leah was making the rounds to all the workplaces the elves of Kehdo and Rapha had been assigned to. Since the kingdom had kindly offered jobs, about half of the elves had found work with the army, but a good number of them had also been offered jobs by civilians. For example, the tavern and inn she was visiting now was one such place.

After greeting them, she checked on the work environment. Fortunately, they were being treated very well. The former residents of Rapha all had bright expressions.

Leah went around to several locations, then returned to the palace around nighttime. It had taken longer than planned, but that was to be expected. Everywhere she went, everyone was always so curious about the tales of Aker’s savior, Majima Takahiro, and his servants. This had detained her several times. It was bad enough that she’d started adding time for it into her schedule.

The one who always ended up dealing with this the most was Kei. The people had already heard the stories from the reclamation villages' elves, but Kei had traveled with Majima Takahiro all the way to Aker from Fort Tilia. She'd watched him for quite a while. Seeing that his other companions couldn't carelessly step out into town, it was only natural for everyone to want to speak with Kei.

"Anyway, you sure have been doing well, Kei," Helena said. She'd been doing the rounds with Leah too. "You don't refuse anyone and you keep them all company. You talk so smoothly too. It's pretty impressive."

Helena wasn't being sarcastic. She genuinely admired Kei. That said, as the one responsible for tying them up everywhere they went, Kei felt a little guilty.

"Sorry for taking up so much time..." she said.

"It's fine, Kei. We don't mind," Leah said, shrugging. "Everyone has it pretty hard working in unfamiliar environments. Having you talk so agreeably about Mister Takahiro helps them in a way. Besides, it's also for Mister Takahiro's sake. In that case, how can I possibly complain?"

"Yes. Thank you very much."

To solidify his foundation in Aker, they had to get the people to accept Majima Takahiro and his servants. To that end, the more chances they had to spread the truth about him, the better. It was slow and steady work, but when she thought of how this would help him, Kei didn't mind, no matter how many times she had to talk about it.

"Anyway, you sure have gotten better at telling the stories," Leah said. "Maybe you have the knack to break into the storytelling business."

"Ah ha ha..."

Kei smiled bitterly at Leah's joke. In truth, she had already received offers to do exactly that. It was far too hard for her as an amateur to speak in front of large crowds, so she'd declined them. Even if Kei didn't accept those offers, the stories would eventually reach professionals through those she'd spoken to directly. If they held performances based on her stories, then they'd naturally spread to a wider audience over time.

These stories included standing with the Alliance Knights at Fort Tilia, escorting the survivors of Fort Tilia all the way to Serrata, escaping arrest at the hands of Margrave Maclaurin, and taking the strongest knight in the northern Woodlands on a journey through the perilous Kitrus Mountains. Then came the flight from the Maclaurin Provincial Army while protecting the reclamation villages' elves, and the eventual counterattack.

How had Majima Takahiro continued his struggle? How much devotion had his servants shown him? How much had they remained unacknowledged so that they could stay hidden?

Now it was different. Even if it was limited only to Aker's borders, they were slowly getting the acknowledgment they deserved. Being able to experience this pleased Kei greatly. When she thought of it like that, talking herself hoarse was nothing. She could easily do even more.

"Kei, you're back?"

"Ah, Lobivia."

As she approached the building Majima Takahiro was staying in, a voice called to her from the side. Lobivia had been waiting. She seemed restless.

"Sorry. Please excuse me for the day," Kei said to Leah and Helena. She then parted ways with the two and went over to Lobivia. "Can you wait a bit longer? I'll go get ready."



Kei was a squire of the Alliance Knights. She devoted herself to her studies whenever possible so that she could one day become a knight. She'd still had a long way to go back at Fort Tilia, but lately, her sword skills had improved to the point where the level of a knight was just about in reach. She could use magic too. To add to that, she knew other martial arts as well.

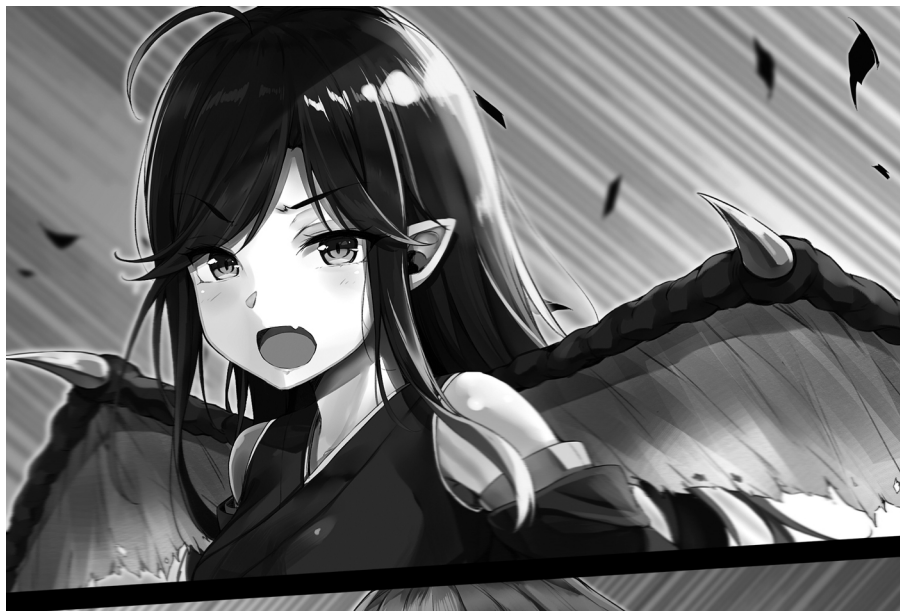
Knights were expected to be masters of every type of weapon. That was because, depending on the many varied monsters they had to defeat, the most effective weapon differed. Fundamentally, they focused on swords and spears while acquiring other techniques as necessary. In extreme cases, they even went as far as learning to fight hand to hand with a dagger in case they lost their primary weapon. That was what Lobivia was trying to learn now.

"There, that's my win."

Lobivia froze. Kei's fist had come to a stop right in front of her chin. The match was decided.

"One more time..."

"Mm, sure thing."



They had started practicing immediately after arriving at Aker's royal palace. Lobivia had asked Kei to teach her hand-to-hand fighting techniques. It was a pretty good idea too. So long as she lived in human society, Lobivia had to maintain her human form. She had a sturdy carapace and an enormous body as a dragon, but it took a moment to transform, making it difficult to deal with sudden attacks. Learning fighting techniques would equip her with the means to deal with such situations.

Also, to grow as a monster, it was necessary to acquire large amounts of mana. The only means to do so was to eat a tremendous amount of monster meat. With a near-limitless capacity for consumption like Lily had, one could get strong in a short amount of time, but everyone else had to get stronger little by little by continuously hunting like Berta did. That took a fair amount of time, and living in the palace like this, going out to hunt was a difficult prospect in and of itself. On the other hand, one could learn human techniques regardless of their location.

Lobivia, however, was a complete amateur when it came to using weapons. It would take a long time for her to acquire the necessary skills. In contrast, she used her limbs as weapons even in dragon form, so she had some affinity for hand-to-hand fighting already.

"L-Lost again..."

"Well, I've been training all this time. It'd be quite the shock if you overtook me right away."

"Can we go one more time?"

"Sure."

Every few days, Shiran, who was a master even in hand-to-hand arts, would drop by to provide guidance. She was in great demand with the Order of National Defense and the Royal Army, though, so Kei and Lobivia mostly trained together without outside assistance.

During training, Lobivia purposefully cut off her mana supply, preventing it from boosting her physique. Her base athleticism was impressive on its own, but with Kei using mana to amplify hers, it put them on equal ground. Kei had better technique, so she had the better winning record, but Lobivia towered above her in combat instinct, what with being a dragon, so Kei couldn't afford to lower her guard. It was very good training for both of them.

"It's going to get dark soon. Let's call it here," Kei said.

"Mm. Thanks."

The sun was setting by the time their training came to an end. In terms of stamina, Lobivia was overwhelmingly superior, so even though Kei won the majority of the bouts, she was far more exhausted than Lobivia.

Out of energy, Kei sprawled on the ground, her limbs stretched wide, and Lobivia helpfully brought a wet cloth and a bottle of water for her. This was their normal routine. Kei accepted them with a word of thanks, and Lobivia took a seat next to her, sitting cross-legged.

Kei peeked to the side, looking up at Lobivia pouting as she apparently went over today's training in her head. Lobivia had kept Kei company during her training many times before coming to the palace, but she'd never asked for guidance to learn techniques like this. Judging by the timing, it was clear that her mother's death and the destruction of her home was the cause for the sudden change, but Kei didn't know how exactly these events had influenced her. Once in a while, her friend looked extremely unstable. Nevertheless, Lobivia chose to keep moving forward rather than curl up in a ball. Kei got courage from this too.

"Hey, Lobivia, can you keep me company for something tonight?"

"I don't mind. What for?"

"I'm thinking of taking on the trial to make a contract with a spirit."

Lobivia's slanted eyes opened wide and her tail went taut.

"Why?" she asked.

Lobivia wasn't a great talker, so Kei wasn't sure whether she was asking, "Why are you deciding to make a contract now?" or, "Why are you telling me about it?" so she decided to answer both questions just in case.

"So long as his conditions are accepted, Takahiro will head to the Empire to hold these talks with the margrave, right? I want to go along with him. I want to be of use to him, but the Fairy Ring can only take a limited number of people with her. Aker will send people for the negotiations as well, so I don't think they'll have the space to bring someone along just to do chores."

"Takahiro wouldn't put it like that."

"Mm. But I think he'll tell me to wait for him here. If I want to be one of the precious few to go along, then I'll need to be of proper use."

Things had changed greatly because of Iino Yuna's visit. It was a change for the better, but it was a fact that Kei would be left behind if she didn't keep up with that change. She didn't want that, so she had no choice but to give chase.

"That's why you wanna make a contract with a spirit?" Lobivia asked.

"Yes. A spirit's detection ability is useful. There aren't many spiritualists in Evernasia, so Aker can't send them out freely. With a spirit, I won't be a burden as one of the members going to the Empire."

The few spiritualists in Aker were very important, so it would be

difficult to send any of them along for the trip. Shiran was also a spiritualist, but having multiple would allow the group to deal with situations where one person wasn't enough. What's more, Kei's combat abilities had improved.

"However, making a contract with a spirit is dangerous. It requires a diligent soul and the purest of prayers. There are times when failing is fatal too."

"I-It's that dangerous? In that case, ain't it better to have Shiran or the like with you?"

"Nope. It's the opposite. I'm sure I'll fail that way."

It was true that having someone by her side would help Kei relax. It would keep her anxieties from becoming idle thoughts and help her concentrate on the contract too. It was still worse that way, though.

"If my sister is with me, deep inside, I'll end up depending on her, so I think the contract will fail."

Kei's instinct as an elf was telling her that depending on someone like that while making a contract would be fatal. At the very least, as she was now, if her guardians, Shiran or Majima Takahiro, were nearby, she wouldn't be able to succeed. It would be different in a few years when she became independent, but that would be too late.

"That's why I want you to watch, Lobivia."

If Kei hadn't become such close friends with Lobivia, she was sure she'd have given up quietly and stayed behind in Aker doing whatever she was currently capable of. That wouldn't be all that bad, but if possible, she didn't want to give up. She wanted to keep going forward, just like the friend before her eyes did. Lobivia had relied on Kei for this, and so Kei relied on Lobivia in turn.

"You're serious, yeah?" Lobivia asked, staring at Kei.

Her sharp eyes turned even sharper, a ferocious air about them. The mana she'd been suppressing during training flared up, and a strong pressure crushed down on Kei. Kei stared back at her kind friend. Her resolve was firm, and she showed no signs of faltering. That was exactly why her determination to take on the trial was adequate. Before long, Lobivia's lips relaxed into a smile.

On that night, Kei succeeded in establishing a contract with a spirit.

The world had begun moving and wasn't going to wait for anyone. Some were running at full speed, trying to change the current state of things, and some were moving to get things under control. Others were moving forward so that they could be of use.

And so the next change came upon them. The following day, just as planned, the Fairy Ring arrived in Aker.

Chapter 7: The Fairy Ring

At noon, two days after Iino's visit, Lily and I sat face-to-face with Iino in my room. We were waiting for the person who was about to arrive.

"Looks like she's here," Iino said, glancing at the magic tool she'd left on the floor.

It was my first time seeing a teleportation runestone activate while nothing else was going on. Everyone in the room watched as it let out a high-pitched shrill and shattered. A black shadow poured out from within, took on a human shape, then washed away like a layer of mud under a shower, revealing beneath a girl who looked a little older than me. She was wearing our school uniform with a blazer, a knife secured at her waist. She looked around the room with a cool expression until her eyes stopped at the table where Iino was sitting.

"What's this, Yuna? Having tea?" she asked.

"We were waiting for you, Shimazu," Iino responded.

"I see. Then may I have some too? Teleporting like this is a little different from when I do it, so it feels wrong. I'd like to take a little break, then we can leave after that."

No sooner than she spoke, she took a seat in an empty spot. Iino smiled and went to pour her some tea.

"So? Would you be Majima Takahiro?" the girl asked, turning my way.



She really went at her own pace. It was a sudden question, but Iino had already explained what kind of person Shimazu was, so it didn't throw me off.

"That's right. It's nice to meet you, Shimazu," I said.

"Nice to meet you too," Shimazu Yui, the girl known as the Fairy Ring, replied curtly.

Her attitude didn't seem to come from any malice, and I couldn't sense any hostility from her either. On the contrary, she stared at me full of interest.

"In any case... Hmm, so you're the one," she murmured.

I was the reason she'd traveled so far out of her way, so it made sense she'd be curious about what kind of guy I was. After staring at me for a few seconds, perhaps satisfied, she shifted her focus to someone else.

"And that would make you Katou Mana."

"Yes, Shimazu-senpai."

"And that's...not Mizushima Miho, is it?"

Only at the end of our introductions did her pace falter a little. The girl she was looking at shook her head, her flaxen hair swaying about.

"No. Right now, I'm Mizushima Miho, Yui-senpai."

"Huh...?" Shimazu looked bewildered.

"I came out today since you were coming, Yui-senpai," Mizushima said, smiling at her impishly. "Oh, you know about my situation, right?"

"Mm, well, I do know, but— Oh, thanks," Shimazu said, accepting the tea from Iino in the middle of talking. "Aah, umm, are you doing okay? Oh, I guess it's weird to ask that. Sorry."

"Hee hee. Things have gotten awfully complicated, but I'm doing good." In contrast to Shimazu, who was confused and carefully picking her words, Mizushima was all smiles. "It's all thanks to Majima and Lilz."

"Hmmm..." Shimazu narrowed her eyes.

Lily and Mizushima's case was delicate. If handled poorly, it could give the exploration team a bad impression. Because of that, Mizushima had taken the initiative to help avert any issues. Shimazu seemed to understand this.

"So that's how it is. I got it," she said, shrugging slightly.

"That's good then," Mizushima replied, grinning. "I hope you can indirectly tell the others in the exploration team too—that Majima has been sheltering both Katou Mana and Mizushima Miho, I mean."

"So you want to avoid complications whenever possible, right? That's fine. I'd also rather not deal with anything troublesome."

“Thank you very much. I love how quickly you pick up on stuff like this, Yui-senpai.”

Shimazu sighed. A beat later, she finally regained her pace. She closed one eye, and her lips curved slightly.

“Are you in love with Majima? You sure have gotten sexier since I last saw you.”

“Wh-Wha—?”

Mizushima’s cheeks turned red as an apple. On reflex, she turned my way, and our eyes met. She turned even redder and hung her head. Shimazu’s shoulders shook with laughter, and she brought her cup to her lips.

“Anyway, I have so much I want to talk about now that I can see you again, but let’s leave it there for now. That’s not what I’m here for today,” Shimazu said as she and Iino turned my way. “So how about it? The plan is to present your conditions to the Holy Church. Is everything ready?”

Perhaps thanks to Shimazu’s conversation with Mizushima, it felt as though the ice had broken a little. Mizushima herself was bright red and trembling, though. Grateful for her noble sacrifice, I got to the point.

“Yes. I’ve already given Iino a letter,” I said. “It involves you too, Shimazu, so do you want to know the details as well?”

“That sounds good. We just happen to have the time right now, so can you?”

“Understood.” I nodded, then began laying out my conditions. “First, about the people who’ll be accompanying me... I heard from Iino that teleportation by Fairy Ring is limited to around twenty people.”

“It’s tiring, after all. Long-distance teleportation is particularly brutal, so I’d prefer to bring as few people as possible, but I suppose that’s a luxury we can’t afford.”

“Sorry. I’m thinking of bringing all my servants with me. There’ll also be a few people from Aker to serve as negotiators, as well as an escort.”

“I’m the one who mentioned the twenty-person limit, so it’ll be fine as long as it doesn’t go too far over. However...” Shimazu paused, peering at my face, full of interest. “Setting aside the people from Aker, you want to bring all your servants, huh? Is that one of your conditions?”

“Yes. I want the Holy Church to acknowledge us in a very easy-to-understand way. If my servants accompany us to the Empire, it will imply that the church has acknowledged their existence. Besides, for my own safety, their attendance is an absolute must for me to go.”

Incidentally, I’d picked a few of the dragons of Draconia to

accompany us too, making them out to be my servants. I wasn't connected to them through the mental path like I was with Lobivia, but the dragons who'd lost their settlement shared the same lot in life as me now, so it wasn't a complete lie either.

"Hmm. You really thought this through," Shimazu said, then turned to Iino. "But is this all right? It'd be easier for the church to do their job if only Majima answered the call."

"It's fine," Iino replied. "The church also said this would likely be the first condition we'd be presented with."

"Hmph. Meaning they're resolved for it already," Shimazu said.

"I'm also going to ask the Holy Church to prepare the inns on our way," I added. "I heard that even using your Fairy Ring, it'll take us a week to get there. We can't afford to bump into unexpected trouble with the locals on our way."

At worst, if people who knew nothing of the situation were to spot Gerbera or the like, it would cause a big uproar. Therefore, it was necessary to have preparations in place at each of our jump points. We had to remain properly isolated so that we didn't encounter any outsiders.

"If you're bringing your servants along, we'll have to do that," Shimazu said. "We'll need to secure the surroundings, set up resting areas, and arrange for lodgings at each spot I teleport us to. Well, I'm sure the Holy Church had planned to handle that much before starting this."

"I also want them to provide me with the entire travel plan beforehand."

"So you want to verify everything to that extent? How careful. Well, considering your scuffles with the Holy Order, that's understandable."

Shimazu was likely aware of how I'd gone at it with one of the Holy Order's companies. It was difficult to regain trust that had been lost already, so it was only natural for me to double-check everything. Besides, even without these circumstances, it was a good idea to check whether anything was lacking. Any plan could have a hole in it, and nothing was better than paying attention where attention was needed. To that end, I'd taken other measures too.

"Also, one condition is for Iino to travel with us," I said.

"Aah, is that so? With Yuna as an escort, it'll be safe no matter what happens."

"I plan on doing whatever I can," Iino said, smiling bitterly.

It was a little unlike her. When I last met her, she would've said, "Just leave it to me." I'd thought this when we reunited the other day, but maybe something had happened since. At any rate, regardless of how she saw herself, having Iino's assistance was very promising. She

had the strongest class of superpower even among the exploration team's cheaters, and her sense of justice was greater than any other. Despite having been hostile to me once because of a misunderstanding—or maybe exactly because of that—she wasn't going to suddenly jump to the wrong conclusion and attack me. In that sense, she was very trustworthy.

“Also, before we even begin, I want them to make a public announcement that the Holy Church is acting as a mediator to hold talks between the savior Majima Takahiro and Margrave Maclaurin. By doing so, the church will have no choice but to put all their effort into making these talks a success.”

“Meaning you want to make it so that they can't back out?” Shimazu asked.

“Basically, yeah. So long as we're headed to the imperial capital, it'll be troublesome if they break their promise to keep the margrave in check.”

There was no need to tell Shimazu, but I had another reason for this condition. I was considering the worst outcome we'd hypothesized, where the Holy Church was after my life. Maybe we were being too suspicious of them, but we couldn't mark it as outright impossible. The church's goal was to calm the chaos spreading across the world, and in terms of only achieving that goal, summoning me to the Empire and killing me as the “fake savior” would be the quickest way.

That said, now that the exploration team was advocating for us, if the church did such a thing openly, it would create a rift between it and the exploration team. This would be amplified if Iino was accompanying us. Instead of tricking us and “attacking the fake savior,” it would be much more realistic for them to claim that “he was assassinated by someone in our territory.”

However, if the church did that, it would be impossible for them to move their forces on a large scale. With my servants and Iino guarding me, it would be extremely difficult to get to me. What's more, even if they succeeded and assassinated me, the church would bear the reputation of being unable to protect a visitor they'd personally invited to the capital. This would rouse suspicion of an assassination, and the exploration team would distrust them as well. In the end, it would inevitably create a fatal rift between the two.

So given the circumstances, say we had them announce to the world beforehand that these talks were being held. If something happened to me, the entire world would learn that the Holy Church had acknowledged me as a savior, and despite going out of their way to invite me to the capital, had been unable to protect me. It wasn't hard to imagine what a severe blow that would be to their authority.

If stability was their goal, then doing that would be putting the cart before the horse. At that point, it would be better for them to ensure these negotiations succeeded, rather than carrying out such a risky assassination. Conversely, if they had no intention of assassinating me, then spreading this announcement wouldn't inconvenience them in any way. It would actually match their intentions.

"According to Iino, these talks are pretty much ceremonial," I said. "It's more or less just a performance. Even if I didn't make this a condition, I think they probably intended to announce it publicly to begin with."

"Now that you mention it, you certainly have a point. It doesn't seem like it'll be a problem," Shimazu replied.

"Also, we're asking the Holy Church to provide aid to Aker due to the damage they've suffered. I don't think this will be a problem either. Aker has presented what they consider an appropriate sum."

"I see. All the conditions you've presented feel very safe. I was worried your requests would be far more unreasonable."

"I'm not gonna do anything like that," I said, smiling wryly. "Although this all stems from the Holy Church's failing to keep Travis on a leash, it'll be problematic for us if these talks don't take place. We're only setting conditions for what we need, which is exactly why I have one last condition."

"One more? What is it?"

"It's about the man called Ottmar Valhalder."

Shimazu knitted her brow. "Ottmar...who?"

"Ottmar Valhalder. He's one of the knights of the Holy Order who attacked me in Aker. I fought against him twice. The first time was when the Fourth Company attacked Kehdo, and the second was during the battle against the Maclaurin Provincial Army. At first, I thought he was part of the Fourth Company, but one of my companions heard from the man himself that this wasn't the case."

In the last stages of the battle against the provincial army, when Rose had used up all her strength, Ottmar had told her that he wasn't part of the Fourth Company. At that point, Rose had been on the verge of death, so he'd had no reason to lie.

"After the battle, Ottmar went missing. Maybe he was annihilated with the army, but it's not a certainty. We've been on guard in case he survived. What we want to know is his identity and objective."

"His objective?"

"Travis took action because he was a gloryhound, but Ottmar wasn't part of Travis's company. In other words, it's possible Ottmar's attack was backed by someone else's intentions."

"You mean to say, for example, there could be another selfish faction in the Holy Order aside from Travis, or other radicals like

Margrave Maclaurin, all working together?” Shimazu asked, grimacing.

“I’m saying it’s possible,” I answered, nodding. “Was Ottmar moving as an individual, or was someone giving him orders? I want the Holy Order to look into this, and if necessary, deal with it. That’s my last condition. The same goes for the remnants of the Fourth Company.”

Fortunately, Ottmar’s ability was easy to identify. It didn’t seem like it’d be difficult to determine his affiliation.

“Regarding this investigation, I plan on asking the vice marshal, Sir Gordon, to carry it out,” Iino said. “I worked with him for a period of time. He can be trusted. Also, I plan on accompanying him to make sure of it with my own eyes.”

“You’re joining the investigation, Yuna? What a hard worker. Aah, or is this because it’s about Majima?” Shimazu said teasingly.

Iino froze on the spot.

“Please don’t say such weird things,” she finally said after a short while, a deep crease forming between her brows. She probably hated those kinds of jokes. “I simply can’t forgive injustice.”

Iino huffed, then for some reason, glared at me. Her behavior was unreasonable, but squabbling every time she did something like this would get us nowhere, so I let it go and addressed Shimazu once more.

“Those are all our conditions. The rest is in your hands.”

“Got it. Leave it to me.”

Shimazu accepted the responsibility, and only then did Iino nod as well without any more retorts. All that was left was to wait and see how the Holy Church would handle it. I couldn’t relax my guard, but it felt like a load had been taken off my shoulders. The same seemed to go for Shimazu. She let out a long sigh and relaxed her posture a little.

“In any case, that’s a relief,” Shimazu said, speaking more frankly. “I was worried about how it would go when we talked this over with the Holy Church.” She paused for a sip of tea, then continued. “We weren’t sure whether you’d listen to the church after one of its orders nearly killed you so unreasonably, and if things went wrong, all our efforts could’ve gone to waste. That’s why it’s a relief to hear all this from you. It makes me want to continue helping with getting this situation under control.”

“True. The exploration team’s help has also been a great benefit.”

“We’re only helping to get things under control at the church’s request. Besides, this is a problem for all visitors as a whole.”

“How so?”

“Mm. Just maybe, the unreasonable treatment you endured

could've happened to any of us," Shimazu elaborated, her tone darkening a little. "If things had been just a little different, it could've... No, it could even still happen. That's why we have to firmly oppose this unjust treatment. We need to make sure there isn't a next time. That's what I believe, anyway."

It seemed Shimazu wasn't taking action only because this was the exploration team's plan; she had her own opinions on the matter. After this, if the Holy Church agreed to our conditions, we were sure to encounter the exploration team in the imperial capital. This was a valuable chance to hear a member's opinion.

"Then did the exploration team's leader also come to that conclusion when he took this on?" I asked.

"Who knows? I wonder about that," Shimazu said, cocking her head. "He's smart, so he may have realized something I can't even imagine. I mean, we know we have nothing to rely on aside from our status as saviors. For that reason, we've been building a place for ourselves here slowly and steadily. That said, I don't know whether he's acting for the same reasons as I am. He's the type of person who wants to support people like you. I feel like he's spurred by motivations that have nothing to do with analyzing what he has to gain and lose."

Shimazu seemed to have the same opinion of him as Iino. Iino had told me before that Nakajima Kojirou liked people who gave it their all. He was probably good at taking care of others. That was exactly how he'd suppressed the chaos immediately after we arrived in this world, and for one month, managed to maintain the Colony. Even now, he was able to keep dozens of cheaters together.

"Well, setting aside our leader, there are a few others in the exploration team who share my opinion," Shimazu said.

"Put another way," Katou cut in, "there are only a few people who do."

"Well, that's one way to look at it. As far as I know, about seventy percent are just angry about how unreasonable the margrave's actions were, and they're supporting this because it's our leader's choice."

"So what about the remaining thirty percent?"

"The exploration team isn't of one mind," Shimazu said, smiling bitterly. Iino also cast her eyes down; she knew the current state of the exploration team too. This was already enough to give me an answer. "Well, there are those who are discontent. They wonder why we have to lodge a complaint against the world's greatest authority, the Holy Church, for a squabble that has nothing to do with them. Not that they've gone as far as openly opposing the decision, though."

I couldn't do much about that. Many among the exploration team had a strong sense of justice, and the large majority of them had

gained their powers because of their “hero aspirations” to begin with. However, their justice wasn’t like Iino’s. She acted to strike down evil no matter what it cost her. They obeyed their sense of justice and acted like heroes only because they had overwhelming strength. It was a prerequisite for them.

That in itself was proof that they were good people at heart, so it wasn’t something to criticize them over. More than a few people would do whatever they liked, even evil, upon gaining power. Taking that into consideration, using the power they’d gained for a righteous cause was worthy of praise, even if the reason for it was simply due to their aspirations for being a hero.

Nonetheless, so long as those aspirations were what motivated them, when they realized that the power they’d been relying on might not be so useful, it was difficult to say whether they would see justice through to the end like Iino would. Actually, in this case, Iino was the abnormal one. A normal person didn’t have the willpower. Maybe this was exactly what had granted her the superpower of the Skanda, putting her in the ultimate class among the entire exploration team when it came to hand-to-hand fighting.

As I thought of such things, I suddenly realized that Shimazu had been staring at me.

“Is something wrong?” I said.

“Majima, is it true that you have no intention of joining the exploration team?” she asked.

Her sudden question, seemingly ignoring the flow of the conversation, caught me off guard, and I choked on my breath.

“I was under the impression that you’d join us after this,” she continued, looking at me curiously, “but when I tried asking Yuna about it, she said you probably wouldn’t. So which is it?”

She had apparently been surprised by Iino’s answer. Well, from the exploration team’s perspective, it was logical for me to want to join them, but I simply didn’t share their opinion.

“Iino was correct. I do not plan on joining the exploration team.”

“Why? Are you maybe wary of Heaven’s Voice? If so, we’ve already confirmed that they aren’t a part of the exploration team, so I don’t think that’s a good reason for refusing.”

That was, in fact, one of my reasons for refusing, but it wasn’t the only one. At times like this, I couldn’t help but remember the Colony’s collapse. I still held a deeply rooted distrust in my heart toward other visitors.

Nevertheless, I hesitated to say that. This situation was different from when Iino attacked me. Currently, I was cooperating with the exploration team to settle things. I couldn’t possibly say to their face that I didn’t trust them.

“Well, I have no complaints with my current lifestyle. I have friends in Aker too. I don’t have a reason to join you.”

I kept the larger reason for why I didn’t want to join hidden, but my life in Aker was one of my other reasons. Not to mention, half of the members who’d participated in the first expeditionary force had already left the exploration team, so it wasn’t mandatory for visitors to join either.

“Besides, wouldn’t it be difficult to get me into the exploration team?” I added. “I’m pretty sure the people who are opposed to their intervention in this case won’t accept me as their comrade.”

“That’s true. There could be some opposition,” Shimazu agreed, but she didn’t back down. “However, I think those who actively approve are in the majority. That includes me.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” she said, looking at me seriously with her cool eyes. “I said this already, but I think it’d be good if we could work together, and if you become one of us, I think it’ll be even better. For both of us, that is.”

“Why are you so insistent?”

“You have rather low self-esteem, I see,” Shimazu said, her shoulders shaking in amusement. “Having protected the elves to the very end, the entire world has its attention on you. It’s enough to split the populace on whether you did good or evil. You don’t seem self-aware, so let me tell you this now. None of us have accomplished anything of note to the degree you have ever since coming to this world. That’s how highly I regard you. Well, it’s not like I’m the only one who thinks that, though.”

“What Shimazu is saying is true,” Iino added curtly. “There are many in the exploration team who rate you highly.”

“Is that so?” I asked, bewildered by the unexpected information.

That said, if Iino was saying it, it was probably true. That was why Shimazu was inviting me to join the exploration team.

“Majima, I don’t think this is a bad offer,” Shimazu added. “The political world is very unstable now, right? Before this, everyone would’ve been fine even if they were separated from the exploration team. Many members have left us already. But now, I think it’s best if we gather as many of us as we can. By doing so, we’re less likely to get caught up in some strange trouble. Besides, even the members who are opposed to getting involved with this will no longer consider themselves unrelated if you become one of us. Conversely, if things remain as they are and something else happens, I don’t know what they’ll do.”

“You...certainly have a point there.”

“I’m not forcing you to join or anything,” Shimazu said,

shrugging. She didn't want to push her opinion on me; she was simply suggesting that things could work out better this way. "I just want you to remember that the choice is available."

With that, she rose from her seat. In an instant, the mana inside her body began accumulating.

"Now then, I guess I should get going," she said.

Her mana capacity was suitable for a nicknamed cheater of the exploration team. She wove the tremendous amount of mana required to activate her inherent ability, Fairy Ring, as she walked up to Iino and placed a hand on her shoulder. After tapping her heels on the ground to a peculiar rhythm, her mana swelled and she turned a smile my way.

"Well, until we meet again."

With those last words, Shimazu and Iino vanished.

Chapter 8: Changing World

I sank into the depths, deeper and deeper, but it wasn't suffocating. It wasn't dark either. I felt a warm light. Sensing something was out of place, I opened my eyes.

"Aah..."

I cried out on impulse. An extremely nostalgic sight spread out in front of me. Rows of apartments. Cars parked on the side of the road. A wide highway past the bottom of the hill. The residential district on the other side. The pleasant scent tickling my nose was probably from the takeout place across the street. It was all so nostalgic—so much so that I realized what this was too quickly.

"Oh, it's just a dream," I murmured, disappointed.

Before me was the town I'd lived in before being teleported to another world, but the scenery wasn't exactly as I remembered. I felt this helpless sense of discomfort.

Looking far off into the distance, the scenery came to an unnatural stop. It wasn't obvious whether it was day or night. The sky was smeared in black, yet visibility was mysteriously clear. Not a single person was in sight, and no cars were zooming down the highway.

In reality, I was currently staying in one of the Five Northern Kingdoms, Aker. I was waiting for Iino to come back from the imperial capital. A part of me did want to go back to my old world, but I knew it would never happen, which was why this could be no more than a dream.

Being a dream, it was imperfect, but it was exactly why I could see my hometown once more. With that thought in mind, I knitted my brow.

"What...the...?"

I looked down. Cracks ran along my figure. A large crevice centered on my left arm carved its path across my entire body. With all the tiny fissures all over, it would be hard to find a spot where there weren't any. That wasn't all either. I saw a fiery, bluish-white projection of myself—a familiar sight. This was how I appeared inside the world of light, the place I'd visited several times already.

"It's not just a dream...?"

But if this was the world of light, something was wrong. The world I knew of was a place of never-ending darkness. This was different. It was possible I was dreaming of the world of light too,

but...

“I can’t really tell.”

In any case, first I had to figure out what was happening. If I walked around, maybe I’d find something out. I tried taking a step. In an instant, my vision dipped.

“Whoa?!”

As I tried to put weight on my right leg, it failed to support me. I felt a strange, mushy sensation, as if I’d stepped on something soft—or as if my leg had melted away. I tried to regain my balance, but my left leg wouldn’t move. It was as if it had become a bloodless wooden leg. At this rate, I would fall over. I reflexively thrust my hands toward the ground, but right before I could, something jumped out and supported my body. It was a spider leg piercing through the asphalt.

“Huh...?”

At the same time, a fissure ran across the ground. It spread out, and in the blink of an eye, cracks ran across the entire world—the apartments, the parked cars, the houses of the residential district, everything. Space itself was no exception. Cracks ran across everything, and then it all shattered.

“Ugh...!”

The nostalgic and warm world crumbled. I couldn’t even scream. In the end, even I crumbled away—and before I knew it, everything was back to normal.

“What...?”

I was dumbfounded. After taking an uneventful step forward, I came to a complete stop. For a moment, I couldn’t understand what was going on. I looked restlessly around me. The world still maintained its original tranquility. It was so calm that it felt outrageous. The nostalgic scenery hadn’t crumbled, and the baffling transformations to my body were gone. Not only that, I couldn’t even see the flame projection of my cracked body anymore. I stood on guard, ready for the next transformation, but nothing happened. After a short while, judging that nothing was going to happen, I slowly let the tension out of my body.

“What the hell was that...?”

It’d been like a waking dream. It was weird seeing a dream inside a dream, but that was the only way I could explain it. I wasn’t sure whether it’d actually happened at this point. Maybe it had all been my imagination. It certainly felt like that now. If so, that was fine. Or perhaps none of it mattered if this was just a dream.

However, if this wasn’t a dream—

“Masss, ter!”

“Wah?!”

As I sank into thought, a voice called out to me, startling me

greatly.

“Asarina?!”

A friendly Venus-flytrap-looking head popped out of nowhere.

“You’re here too?”

“Sssster.”

Without paying my shocked state any mind, Asarina purred at her own pace and started playfully prodding at me. I didn’t mind pampering her, but there was a time and place for everything.

“H-Hang on a sec, Asarina.”

I grabbed her as she began play-biting around my chin. She wriggled around curiously at this.

“If you’re here, then this isn’t a dream?”

“Ster.”

“Where is this?”

“Ster?”

“You don’t know?”

“Sssster.”

“I see. Oh well.”

“Sttter.”

Well, it wasn’t going to be that simple. I let Asarina go, and she continued play-biting me as I scratched my head.

“Anyway, if you’re here, it wouldn’t be weird for the others to be too, but...”

That said, there was no one in sight as far as the eye could see. I couldn’t sense anything from the mental path that linked me to all my servants either.

“Wait, no. I can feel something...”

“Sster.”

Mysteriously, I could feel the others through the mental path. They were right next to me, but I couldn’t see them. The only ones in sight were Asarina and I. Also...

“Is anyone else here?” I called.

“Sssster.”

“You want me to come with you?”

Asarina stretched out far, bobbing up and down to indicate in a certain direction. There was no point standing around here, so I started walking.

“Sssster!”

I went down the curved road Asarina was pointing out. Coincidentally, this was the way to my high school. I was familiar with this path, so I walked without hesitation. It kind of felt as if I were taking a dog for a walk.

“Oh yeah, did you see that earlier, Asarina?”

“Ster?”

“Like the world was crumbling for an instant... Aah, never mind. It's fine if you don't know what I'm talking about.”

“Ssster!”

We kept talking as Asarina happily led me down the path to my high school. And on the way there, we bumped into her.

“Oh, Master.”

Salvia's golden-brown hair swayed behind her as she turned my way. She was crouching down by the roadside for some reason. She hadn't come out since the battle with the provincial army, so it'd been a while since I'd seen her face. I started walking closer, and she stood up and waited for me. She looked at me with a gentle smile, then shifted her focus to my companion.

“Asarina, did you bring him here for me?”

“Ssster! Ter!”

“There, there. Good girl.”

Asarina shook about energetically, and Salvia gently petted her. She then shifted her downturned eyes my way.

“In any case, I didn't think I'd meet you all the way out here, my dear.”

“Neither did I. Actually, what is this place, anyway?” I asked, glancing around me.

Salvia put her hand to her cheek gracefully, then cocked her head.

“How to explain it?” she said. “Rather, wouldn't you know better than me?”

“Well, I guess I know. This is the world I come from.” I looked around, then shook my head. “But not the world itself.”

“That's about right. I'm sure you already noticed, but this is the place you call the world of light.”

“So it really is...”

That was what it'd felt like until recently, so I accepted it with ease. Now that I thought of it, when I'd fought against the Travis variant of Holy Water, Salvia and Asarina had been the only ones who could intervene inside the world of light. The fact that they were the only ones here now was probably for the same reason. That much made sense to me, but I still grimaced.

“This isn't the world of light I know of, though,” I said.

It was supposed to be a pitch-black world far beyond the depths, a place beyond human cognition. That was the impression the world of light had given me. This, on the other hand, was completely different.

“Meaning it changed?” I muttered suspiciously.

If so, what did that imply?

“Rather than change, I suppose you could say it evolved,” Salvia said, a faint air of sorrow in her voice. “You could also say it has advanced to the next stage... The transformation of this world is likely

related to your ability, my dear.”

“Uhh...”

This was bad news. By the time I realized that, it was too late. Salvia’s gaze was clearly sour now.

“You already know, don’t you?” she said, anger written on her face. “What you did last time was irreversible. To defeat Travis and the Holy Water, you really reached your hand out right to the limit. Even though going there once means never coming back again...”

Salvia took a step closer and peered into my eyes.

“A wish beyond your means will destroy your body. This was before I became your servant, so I didn’t witness it for myself, but I’ve heard of what happened when Lily was kidnapped by the Mad Beast Takaya Jun. I’ve lived a long life, so I know of other such examples. The power you visitors possess sometimes brings about your own destruction. You are no exception to that, my dear. Do you truly understand this?”

She kept on criticizing me. Depending on the situation, this could be interpreted as an annoying sermon. However—

“In that case, you need to treat yourself more dearly,” she continued. “You’re going to live a peaceful life with everyone, right? It’s just a little further. If these talks go well, the future you dreamed of will be in reach. You have your priorities backward if you destroy yourself before grasping it.”

“You’re right,” I said, accepting everything she said. “Thanks.”

Salvia remained silent.

“I’m grateful for the scolding,” I added.

There’d been no other choice at the time. I couldn’t have saved Rose otherwise. No matter how many times that choice was presented to me, I would surely do the same thing every time. I had nothing to be ashamed of.

But this was this, and that was that. My choice definitely hadn’t been a good thing. That was also the truth. If it was necessary, I wouldn’t hesitate, but it wasn’t something I could rely on so naively. I couldn’t misinterpret it. With someone to scold me like this, I wouldn’t.

“Good grief...” Salvia said, looking somewhat troubled yet also affectionate.

A moment later, she suddenly smiled and took another step closer. As I wondered what she was up to, she pulled me into an embrace. It startled me, and I stiffened. This wasn’t an embrace between lovers, but one simply filled with deep affection. She patted the back of my head a few times while Asarina purred curiously from my side.

“Such an adorable child. You’re all so lovable. When you act so earnestly like that, it makes me want to cheer you all on.”

“Umm... Salvia? It’s a little embarrassing when you treat me like a child,” I protested.

Salvia giggled. Her tender body felt warm, like basking in the sun, and the slight tremors from her laughter ran through me.

“You’re a child to me,” she said. “Every human living in this world is.”

“That might be true, but...”

In all likelihood, she was one of the oldest beings in the world. I didn’t have much room for argument, so I obediently let her treat me like a child.

“Yes, it is. You’re all such adorable children,” Salvia said lovingly, squeezing me a little tighter.

She held me in her embrace for a while longer, and eventually satisfied, she loosened her hold on me a little.

“Now then, let’s leave the scolding at that, shall we? It looks like you understand well enough,” she said as she let go, then sighed regretfully. “Aah, looks like time is up.”

Her voice was a little hazy. I felt my consciousness floating away from me. I was about to wake up.

“How unfortunate,” Salvia said. “We finally got the chance to come here, even if it’s only the two of us. I wanted you to show us around your world, my dear.”

“Ssster.”

“Hmm. Maybe next time. If the opportunity arises, may I ask that of you?” Salvia asked, clapping her hands together in front of her chest.

“Yeah. One day, for sure...” I nodded, and Salvia made a face like she was looking forward to it.

My consciousness faded more and more, and I felt myself floating to the surface.

“See you later, my dear,” Salvia said, waving me goodbye. “Do be sure not to make any of the girls you share your love with, and the ones who are in love with you, cry.”

“I know.”

I would only throw everything about myself away as a last resort. I nodded, but then almost immediately, Salvia’s wording bothered me. I knew who the girls I shared my love with were, but what did she mean by the ones who were in love with me? Before I could ask, my consciousness separated from this world.

Chapter 9: The Boy's Hesitation and the Girl's Words

The Maclaurin Provincial Army's hostilities toward us and the upheaval shaking the entire world...

The Holy Church's intervention and their apparent willingness to cooperate...

The exploration team's help and an invitation to join them...

I had many things to think about regarding several external factors. However, that didn't mean I could forget all of our internal affairs. At this point in time, I definitely couldn't neglect my relationship with Aker, whose fate was slowly intertwining with ours. We each did what we were capable of, built more trust in each other, and deepened our social network. It was important we build a firm foundation here.

"I'm beat..." I mumbled as I climbed the stairs.

"Good work today," Lily said.

"You must be tired too, Lily."

"Not as bad as you, Master."

"I'm a teensy bit tired too," Gerbera joined in.

"Hee hee. You two really stood out," Lily said.

The three of us continued chatting as we ascended the staircase. We'd just returned after going out to suppress monsters in the region. The exhaustion we were feeling wasn't entirely from physical exertion, though. On the contrary—physically, I felt perfectly fine.

Aker's Order of National Defense had thoroughly investigated this operation beforehand, and we'd put together a proper plan, making sure we had sufficient man power to carry it out. The force had been composed of several knights with our group at the core, and we'd carried out the suppression without any problems. Including our travel time, it'd taken five days, but having spent so much time traveling to begin with, it wasn't particularly tiring for us. The major ordeal had come after our return.

"Hee hee. You were really cool, Master." Lily took my arm and snuggled up against me, peering up at my face with a smile. "Good thing so many people came to see, huh?"

"Yeah. They held a whole parade and everything. It would've been a waste if nobody showed up..."

As I returned her smile, I recalled the day's event.



To state the obvious, even Aker disliked monsters, so it wasn't just a simple matter to get its people to accept my servants. Fortunately, our battle with the Maclaurin Provincial Army had turned into a lucky break, changing Aker's public opinion in our favor. That said, we couldn't rest on our laurels. We couldn't afford to let this opportunity go to waste.

So what were we to do? We'd been able to socialize with a portion of the knights and soldiers who regularly visited the palace, but the general public was a different matter. Going out to talk to them one by one to get them to understand was out of the question, but if things were left as is, it would be forever before Gerbera or the others could walk around outside.

For Aker to accept my servants, we needed a huge positive to negate the existing enormous negative. That was what the parade celebrating our triumphant return was for. Currently, just the name Majima Takahiro meant "the hero who protected elves from the Maclaurin Provincial Army."

That hero was now going to appear before the people for the first time. What's more, he was doing so to celebrate his victory after suppressing monsters for Aker's sake. Many people were sure to gather to see the rumored hero for themselves, so our objective was to unveil my servants to them using that occasion. Not that this plan really struck a chord with me.

This idea had come up after discussing it with Philip's group, but deep inside, the whole idea of "a parade for a hero's triumphant return" didn't make much sense to me—having spent so long on my journey avoiding the public eye because of my ability. The only one from my group who'd been going in and out of town was Kei. She'd told me, "You have an amazing reputation! It's really true!" Regardless, I couldn't wrap my head around it. Not until I saw it before my eyes, at least.

"This is...pretty impressive."

After safely suppressing the monsters in the region, we returned to the castle town with the knights. I stood in an open horse-drawn carriage, which made it easy for the people to see me from all over. Naturally, this meant I had a good view too, and I could see the extremely dense crowds on both sides of the main street beyond the gates.

"This is my first time seeing so many people since coming to Aker," I said.

"Ha ha. I'm sure it is," Philip replied from my side. He wasn't nervous at all. He was obviously used to this kind of parade because of

his status.

“Is it always like this?” I asked.

“No. Even I’ve never seen the populace get *this* excited. Many people always come to see our return, of course, but this is unprecedented.”

Parades celebrating the triumphant return of soldiers and knights who’d gone out to suppress monsters was a common event both in and out of Aker. It served to easily display to the people that the threat had been dealt with and to raise troop morale. As royalty, Philip had had many opportunities to participate in such festivities, so when he said he’d never seen it like this, it had to be quite the exception.

“All those people came just to see you, right?” Lily said cheerfully, standing next to me with her favorite black spear in hand. “That’s amazing. Hee hee, you’re totally ‘Aker’s savior’ now, Master.”

She looked honestly pleased with that. I unintentionally let a bitter smile slip, and Lily leaned over and looked up at me.

“Nervous?” she asked.

“Well, yeah. That’s a lot of people.”

I turned to look and spotted a massive swarm of people, a maelstrom of expectation and wild enthusiasm building among them. Having to step into that triggered a different kind of tension from standing and facing an enemy. I gulped. Honestly, I was pretty nervous about whether I was going to let them down.

Lily called out to me once more. “Master.”

I turned back to look at her and was faced with a breathtakingly sweet smile. She looked straight into my eyes, the trust in her gaze bringing me peace of mind.

“Let’s give it our all, okay?” she said.

“Yeah... Let’s.”

My heart suddenly calmed down, and I once more remembered why I was here. Yes. How could I have forgotten? I would do anything for their sakes. If they were by my side, there was nothing I couldn’t do. Holding on to that conviction, I readied myself and took a quiet breath.

“Shall we?” I said.

“Understood.” Philip nodded and gave instructions to the driver.

The carriage began moving as a loud trumpet announced the beginning of the parade. The column came into view of the populace, and the first thing they saw was the leading carriage bearing deceased monsters. The most conspicuous among them was a large ruby bear, followed by many azure hares, whose breeding season was approaching. In this world, monsters were equivalent to a natural disaster waiting right next to home. Seeing that threat removed before it could do any damage, the people cheered with joy.

Behind that carriage was a formation of soldiers, their spears held high while others played trumpets as they marched down the main street. While the knights were away on this mission, the soldiers had protected the capital, and now they took on the role of welcoming the returning knights.

Next to come into view were the knights. They held their chests out with looks of cheerful pride, mainly because there'd been no losses on this outing. According to Philip, they sometimes suffered casualties when suppressing monsters, so simply coming back with everyone safe and sound was a great accomplishment. The populace had already been notified of this joyous information, but above all else, the delighted atmosphere among the knights conveyed something to the people. The gathered crowd got even more fired up.

That was when my carriage proceeded toward the gates. It felt really strange. Until now, I'd never even considered myself a savior. That hadn't changed. I had sworn to be Shiran's savior, but that was only between us. All I'd done to date was do my best to protect what was dear to me, yet before I knew it, I was Aker's savior. Honestly, it was perplexing. I didn't think I would ever get used to it, nor did I think I was suited for it.

Nonetheless, if this was necessary, if it was for my companions' sakes, I wasn't going to turn down this opportunity. Maybe I was acting exactly the same as always, in a sense. To protect what was dear to me, I put in every ounce of strength I had. This was no different.

The carriage passed through the gates, under the tall walls surrounding the town.

"Guh!"

Deafening cheers overwhelmed me—voices, voices, and more voices. Enthusiasm filled the air. It felt as if waves of emotion were crushing down on me, enough to make me dizzy. At the same time, it felt as if the people of this country had accepted me. Their emotions flooding over me were all favorable, after all.

That honestly made me happy. Taking time to participate in this operation while dealing with the upcoming negotiations with the margrave and the Holy Church, as well as socializing with the soldiers and knights as much as we could, had all been for this moment. Setting aside being a hero or whatnot for now, I was happy that our efforts had borne fruit.

Above all else, with this, the possibility of my companions finally being accepted was within my grasp. All the conditions were in place; we'd set the stage for a hero's triumphant return. It was already common knowledge how hard my servants had fought to protect the elves of Kehdo and Rapha. It'd also been made public beforehand that

they'd played an active role in suppressing monsters this time. All that was left was to follow the program.

I carefully wove my mana, then stretched out a hand to gather all eyes on me.

“Misty Lodge.”

Fortunately, even under the pressure of knowing that failure wasn't an option, my magic activated successfully. In an instant, an explosive outburst of mist enveloped the main street. For a moment, silence fell over the noisy crowd. And then...

“Guh!”

They cheered twice as loud as before. It'd been announced already that I'd be showing off this magic during the parade. That was why, even though the people had been shocked, the crowd's reaction hadn't broken down into chaos. To put it bluntly, one of the reasons so many people had gathered here today was to witness this. Aker's citizens had been told that the Misty Lodge was the grand magic that'd routed the provincial army.

The dramatic storytelling of *Majima Takahiro's Battle against the Maclaurin Provincial Army* was apparently a big hit in Aker's capital already. This was hearsay, of course, since I'd never gone to see it myself, but I was told that the scene where a magic mist threw the provincial army into chaos was particularly popular.

After the mist came the friendly dragons that flew overhead. The people who'd hearkened to these tales were unquestionably imagining that scene, their hearts pounding in excitement. That was how they'd figured it out right away.

“Look up!” someone shouted.

Up in the sky, dragons calmly flew in circles. They were the dragons of Draconia who were now living in Aker. I'd asked them to participate in these festivities. Normally, if ferocious dragons were spotted directly above town, the people would be panicking. Even if they knew these monsters posed no danger, some might not have accepted them. However, only in this moment were things different. Right now, they were living out the tales.

After flying around high in the sky, the dragons soared off to the royal palace. Many eyes followed them, reluctant to see them leave. Next, I undid my magic mist, but another magic remained in full effect. The people's focus returned to me. Their enthusiasm hadn't waned. Having experienced a mock-up of the tales that'd sent their hearts aflutter, they looked to me with expectation, wondering what was going to happen next.

Everything was going to plan. Actually, it was going even better than planned; it was practically a theatrical recreation now. In this moment, those who wouldn't normally accept any of this would

accept anything. This atmosphere was the true magic here. We just needed one more push.

I signaled Lily with my eyes, and she spun her spear about next to me. The tales spoke of a servant who used a black spear, so it was immediately apparent that she was a monster. The episode of her stalling half of the provincial army by hurling her spears at them was apparently also insanely popular.

Lily waved to the crowd, and a cheer broke out. This wasn't part of the program, but she'd decided that a little ad-lib would be fine given the atmosphere. She then twirled her spear for show, letting it whistle through the air, and the cheering grew more intense.

"Hup."

Lily then hopped off the carriage and undid the mimicry of one of her arms. A transparent feeler stretched my way, but the crowd—now the audience to our story—felt no fear. I took hold of the feeler in front of me and descended from the carriage as if escorted to the ground.

The next carriage then came into view. Unlike the one we'd been riding, this one was an enclosed box. A large door on the side opened. As expected, when an enormous spider leg stretched out of it, people were clearly startled. However, they also already knew about this too.

"Hmmm... This is quite the spectacle."

Gerbera looked around the area without a hint of timidity. She looked imposing, only her bloodred eyes harboring a sense of childlike innocence in them. The strongest of my servants, the Great White Spider, the beautiful arachne—those who'd heard the tales had surely imagined her beauty, but seeing her in person made them realize that they'd been lacking in imagination. Many sighed in admiration.

Gerbera had elven children by her side, the ones from the reclamation villages who'd gotten along with her. Many among the crowd were likely remembering the episode where Gerbera protected the elves from the pursuit force's relentless attacks. Seeing as how the children weren't the least bit afraid, it was clear that Gerbera wasn't dangerous.

"My Lord."

"Here."

Now it was my turn to be Gerbera's escort. As I took her outstretched hand, she said, "I'm like a princess in a fairy tale," with a genuine smile. I still felt a little tense, but I returned her smile.

Even after mounting my carriage again, the cheering didn't stop. The parade remained lively until the very end.



"I'm really glad I didn't mess anything up..."

Thinking back on it, I let out a huge sigh of relief. Seeing this, Lily giggled.

In any case, our reception had been more than good enough. It would still be hard to take Gerbera or the others outside right away, but if we repeated this kind of thing several times and got the people of Aker accustomed to it little by little, then one day... Now I was able to believe that.

With things going how they were, it was worth considering unveiling some of my other servants to the public. Thinking of what there was to gain, a little mental exhaustion was a cheap price to pay.

As we continued talking, we reached our destination—a lounge in the section of the palace that the royal family had lent to us. The elves of the reclamation villages used a lounge somewhat closer to the entrance, but this one was used by me and my servants.

It appeared my other servants hadn't returned yet. Shiran had told me that she had a meeting with the Order of National Defense that would go on for a while, and Lobivia was supposed to be keeping Kei company in her training around now. Ayame was probably basking in the sun with Berta.

I sat down on a sofa and let out another deep sigh. I felt a satisfaction and an exhaustion that differed completely from what I experienced during my usual training.

"Okay, Gerbera," Lily said, without taking a seat next to me. "I'll leave our master to you."

"Hm? Are you going somewhere?" Gerbera asked curiously.

"I was thinking of dropping by the library," Lily answered, smiling cheerfully.

"Ooh, I see. You sure do enjoy it there."

"Hee hee. We have the rare chance to go to the castle's library whenever we want. Besides, you know, I might even find some helpful information there."

Aker's royal palace had quite the splendid library, and I'd gotten permission for me and all my servants to browse the books there at our leisure. Not that Gerbera or my other servants could read, and Katou and I had only started learning, so we could only understand children's books at best. The only ones who could make any real use of the library were Lily and Mizushima.

"Sorry for leaving all that to you," I said. "You must be tired too."

"I'm not all that tired, so it's fine," Lily said, waving her hand about. "Besides, Miho's dying to get some reading time in."

Lily's bottom half returned to slime form, and Mizushima popped out from the transparent mass. She'd skillfully manifested only from the shoulders up, making it look as if she were peeking out of a body of water.



“That’s the gist of it, Majima. I’ll be borrowing Lilz, ’kay? We have the chance to and all, so I wanna read as much as I can.”

“You really love books, huh?” I said.

“Hee hee. Well, we don’t know when we’ll get a chance like this again. I have to take Lilz with me, though.”

“It’s fine. You don’t need to put it like that,” Lily said. “I like books a fair bit too thanks to your influence. It’s a good breather. You don’t need to worry about it either, okay, Master?”

“That so? Okay then.” I nodded, smiling at how well the two seemed to get along. Having two personalities in one body seemed pretty troublesome at first, but they were handling it well. “Have you found anything interesting?”

“Hm? Let’s see...” Lily lowered her eyes, and Mizushima reflected her like a mirror as they sank into thought.

“There were a few books that touched on the geography around the imperial capital, so I guess those’ll be useful?” Mizushima said.

“Also, remember? We jotted down that recipe that dish was based on,” Lily added.

“Aah, the one you really liked?”

“You should try cooking some time too, Miho.”

The breadth of books they’d been reading seemed to be fairly wide. It was interesting how it brought out their individual personalities.

After thinking about it a little more, Lily clapped her hands. “Oh right, speaking of interesting things.”

“Did you find something?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm. Remember hearing about the savior legends that the Holy Church promulgates around the world? There’re records going pretty far back written in the style of legends,” Lily said, raising a finger. “There are legends from the appearance of the very first savior all the way up to now. That said, when it comes to anything from a thousand years ago or earlier, the dates get really fishy, and nothing unfavorable is written down.”

“Stuff like every single visitor fighting heroically without exception, and anything related to elves being omitted?” I asked.

“Yup, that. For example, during the time elves were discriminated against as traitors to humanity, none show up in the savior legends. Considering people like Shiran, it’s hard to believe that no elves ever accompanied a savior. It’s possible that these facts were left out of the records, or erased as time went on, but this is Aker. They don’t have any prejudice against elves, right?”

After hearing that much, I understood what she was getting at.

“Meaning records of elves might remain in Aker’s library?” I

asked.

“Mm-hmm. Exactly. Well, I brought up elves as an example, but I’m basically looking for stuff from a perspective besides the Holy Church’s. By comparing them, maybe we can figure out the church’s thought process, sense of values, and policies. That’s what Miho and I think, at least.”

“I see.”

The two of them had put some thought into this.

“So? Found anything yet?” I asked.

“It’s a little early to jump to any conclusions, but starting with the church... Even from Aker’s point of view, the Holy Church and Holy Order serve to protect the world. On this point, there aren’t any contradictions with the church’s legends. They maintain world order. For example, even if a big noble is found guilty of shady behavior, the church punishes them severely. Stuff like that. From that perspective, Travis was a big exception. Or rather, he pulled it off really skillfully.”

In other words, Travis Mortimer had just been that talented. With that in mind, I realized he’d had a tremendous effect in the worst way imaginable on the current state of the entire world. If he’d used that talent for good, things might’ve been very different.

“So the interesting part comes next,” Lily continued. “It goes a little off topic, though. Elves show up every now and then in Aker’s history books, but no matter the book, there is no mention of them further than eight hundred years back. Actually, there aren’t that many books touching on anything before that in the first place. It’s like information from that age is just cut out.”

“How so?”

“Mm. Seems like there was a global calamity—an explosive outbreak of monsters accompanied by a natural disaster or something.”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it...”

“It’s not touched upon in the savior legends. They might’ve deemed it damaging to the saviors’ absolute reputation or something. Still, it definitely had an impact. The legends from before that time are really vague.”

This opinion could only have been drawn from visiting the library. A large majority of my knowledge depended on Shiran. She was very learned for being a commoner, but with no compulsory education in this world, there were limits. It was useful to gather knowledge from books like Lily was doing now.

“That’s about all we figured out so far,” Lily said. “We’re planning on looking into more history books and stuff related to the church.”

“Got it. I know you’re enjoying it, but try not to overdo it.”

“Mm. We’ll be back before dinner. Take it easy, Master.”

With that, Lily bent at the waist and kissed me on the cheek. At the same time, I felt lips pressing against my opposite cheek. I turned around in astonishment, but Mizushima, who should've been there, was already gone.

"Jeez. That Miho. She's so shy," Lily said, giggling in exasperation.



After Lily left the room, I lay down on the sofa. I wasn't just obeying her or anything, but I decided to take a little rest. After getting comfortable, I let out yet another long sigh.

"Rather tired, I see," Gerbera said, peeping up from behind the sofa. "Me too... Hwaah, I'm just a little tired." Her eyes lost focus as she leaned against the back of the sofa.

While we both rested with nothing in particular to do, someone called out to me.

"Ah, Senpai."

I might've dozed off for a bit. I opened my eyes, turned to the voice, and saw Katou coming my way. Rose was behind her. When she got a little closer, she bowed courteously. The two of them had stayed behind in the castle without participating in the monster-suppression operation.

"Welcome back, Master," Rose said. "I came this way after hearing from my sister. She told me to guard you with Gerbera during her absence. Do you mind if I do my work here?"

"Not at all," I said.

"Thank you very much."

Lily was probably being considerate and creating an opportunity for her little sister to spend time with me after I'd been away for a few days. I had no complaints with this. Katou and Rose started spreading items out on the floor for Rose to work. They laid out a thick cloth to keep the floor clean, then placed her tools atop it. They were positioned in front of the sofa I was lying down on.

"Mana, please take a seat around there."

"Got it."

Rose sat down near the center of the wide space, and Katou took a seat next to her. Framed by her pigtails, Katou's nape was defenselessly within reach of my hand.

"Then shall we begin?"

Rose pulled out her knife. During the series of battles against the Holy Order and the Maclaurin Provincial Army, a significant portion of the magic tools she'd made had been expended. Replenishing them was an urgent necessity, so for the last month, Rose had been making things whenever there was nothing else to do.

I felt bad lying down on the sofa when she was working so hard, so I was about to sit up, but Rose stopped me.

“Master, please stay as you are. You must be tired.”

“But ya know...”

“Rose is right,” Katou joined in, turning to face me. “You went on a long trip, fought monsters, then took part in an unfamiliar parade in front of tons of people. Nobody will complain if you rest a little. In fact, we’ll feel restless if it looks like we’re getting in the way of your break. Please take it easy, Senpai.”

“Well...if you say so.”

It was true that I was mentally exhausted, and I would just be a nuisance if I argued here. We’d spent so long eating and sleeping in the same spaces that I didn’t particularly care about being seen lying down at this stage. Deciding to accept their kindness, I yawned.

“You really must be tired,” Katou said, putting a hand to her mouth and giggling. “Oh yeah, it’s a little late, but congratulations. I also watched the parade. I’m glad it succeeded.”

“You went to see it?”

“Oh, no. I watched it from here. We have a telescope, so I used that.”

“Aah, that’s what you meant.”

Katou hadn’t recovered from her androphobia yet, so it would’ve been rough for her to be in such a huge crowd.

Around then, Katou giggled again. I wondered what it was, and she pointed behind me with her eyes.

“Looks like Gerbera fell asleep,” she said.

“Looks like.”

Gerbera’s quiet breathing sounded from the back of the sofa she was leaning on. Her habitual behavior usually made her look cute, but like this, she was a real beauty. I was staring at her in dazed fascination when Rose called out to me once more.

“How about taking a nap as well, Master? If so, would it be better for you to go to bed?”

“No, I’m not that tired. It’s fine.”

I shifted my focus to Rose. She was shaving away at what looked like the hilt for a weapon or something. She handled her magic knife so smoothly that her movements looked like real magic at work. I could never get tired of watching her. As the wood shavings piled up on the ground, Katou gathered them up so that they didn’t get in the way and put them in a bag. Her eyes then abruptly turned my way.

“Oh yeah, Senpai. Can I ask you something?”

“Hm? Always.”

Katou closed the bag she was holding, then faced me.

“The other day, when Shimazu-senpai was here, she offered you

the chance to join the exploration team, right?"

"Oh, that..."

"You didn't give her an answer on the spot, did you? I figured you would've refused right away. Is there a reason for that?"

Her tone was casual; she didn't have any particular reason for asking beyond simple curiosity. Although, whether the same applied to me was a different matter. I sank into thought a little before answering her.

"Well, I guess that's the reason itself."

Katou blinked in confusion. She had very innocent features to begin with, so this gave her a very childish look.

"Meaning?"

"Katou, you figured I'd refuse, right? That's 'cause I experienced the Colony's destruction. I can't help but be wary of an entire group of visitors. I can't join a group I can't trust." I paused, then sighed.

"That's what I thought, at least..."

"Do you feel differently now?"

"No, I don't," I answered, then added, "but I wonder if that's really all right."

Shimazu had been a lot friendlier than I'd expected, so a thought had suddenly come to mind. Was it okay for me to refuse them on the spot? That was when I'd realized something.

"I suddenly feel like maybe I'm being swept up by my emotions from that time." Once I noticed that, I couldn't ignore the possibility. "I'm responsible for leading everyone. Even if the best choice isn't always available, at the very least, I have a duty to determine what's best for us. Refusing to do that because I was affected by emotion would be the opposite of that."

Having the choice but not picking it was different from acting like the choice didn't exist to begin with. The former was making a decision, while the latter was simply refusing to.

"I want to believe I'm making decisions only after thinking them through," I continued, "so I'm starting to wonder whether I'm being spurred on by emotions. That's why I couldn't refuse or accept on the spot."

"I think you've been doing just fine," Katou said.

"That'd be nice if so... I don't have much confidence when it comes to this case, though."

Katou believed in me, but I didn't know whether she was right. My gaze naturally drifted toward the ceiling, and I smiled bitterly.

"Aah, sorry. I didn't mean to moan about it," I said.

I was well aware that I'd gone on about it more than I'd meant to. Maybe I was complaining like this because I was tired.

"Anyway," I added, pulling myself back together, "that's why I

didn't refuse. It's not much of a reason, so when it's time to make a decision, I'll do it properly. You don't need to worry about it."

I put my hand to my temple as if wiping away the haze over my thoughts, when suddenly, someone grabbed that same hand.

"Katou...?"

Before I knew it, Katou was bent over me.

"It's all right," she said.

Maybe she'd done it entirely on reflex. Her face was thirty centimeters closer than usual. It didn't seem as if she realized this either.

"You'll do just fine, Senpai."

Her voice was strong and reassuring, and her face was red from being so close to mine. The power behind her words rocked my heart greatly.

"I believe in you," she added.

Because of her rising body temperature, her scent grew more prominent. She smelled so sweet. We'd known each other long enough for me to distinguish this as Katou's aroma. She was always with me from "good morning" to "good night." Back as students in our world, this would've put us far beyond being best friends; maybe it was rare even for lovers to spend so much time together. And yet she wasn't my servant or anything of the like.

Saving her from a horrible experience, distrusting her at first, regretting the mistake I'd made, hearing that she wanted to stay with me—we'd shared so much time together until now. She was just as important to me as Lily and all the other girls were. I wanted to protect her.

Just maybe, her very existence was what was making me hesitate.

After all, Katou was a visitor. Unlike Mikihiko, I hadn't known her back in our world or anything. We'd met after the Colony's destruction, and after an accumulation of good and bad events, things had settled to their current state.

She was a visitor, just like the members of the exploration team. What was the difference between her and them? The fact that they had cheats and she didn't? If so, if she had a cheat, would I push her away? If that was impossible for me, then why did different rules apply to the exploration team? Or was Katou a special exception? If so, how was she special? In short, what was Katou Mana to me? Because of my fatigue, that ambiguous thought came to mind—

"Ah."

Perhaps coming back to her senses, Katou let go of my hand. Her cheeks turned redder and redder for what seemed like an entirely different reason from before.

"S-Sorry."

She pulled back in a panic and clenched the fingers that'd been holding my hand just moments ago as if they'd been burned. She looked my way with flushed cheeks and slightly wet eyes. Somehow, her expression looked both heartrending and special. I unintentionally averted my eyes.

"Aah, um, there's nothing to apologize for," I said.

Put bluntly, this was bad. I was liable to greatly misunderstand at this rate. She had androphobia. In her case, it was absolutely impossible. The two of us sank into silence. The mood felt both awkward and restless, then...

"My Lord, Katou."

The two of us started at the sudden voice. Before we knew it, Gerbera, who should've been sleeping, had her eyes open. She quietly straightened herself up from the back of the sofa.

"What is it, Gerbera?" asked Rose, who'd been quiet all this time. She did so because Gerbera's expression was very stern, her red eyes focused on the door.

"I sense something strange," Gerbera said. "Be careful."

Before I could ask what she meant, I sensed a presence approaching our room. I immediately switched gears and got to my feet. I grabbed my sword, which had been standing against the sofa, and readied myself to draw it at any time. Several seconds later, a large wolf entered the room.

"Berta?" I called out to her, even as many questions came to mind.

All she'd been doing lately was lounging around, but now she was very stiff. She seemed extremely tense. Ayame, who'd come in with her, ran over to me with a pitter-patter. Normally, Berta was very good at looking after others, but now, she didn't even give Ayame a glance.

"Majima Takahiro. May I have a little of your time?" Berta asked stiffly.

I understood why right away. A boy had entered the room behind her.

"Excuse me."

The air froze.

"Kudou..."

"It's been a long time."

Berta's master, the Lord of Darkness Kudou Riku, smiled cheerfully.

Chapter 10: The Demon King's Pain

"Please excuse the sudden visit," Kudou said, sitting down on one of the sofas in the room. "It's rather difficult for me to make an appointment, given my position."

His smile was unbelievably gentle for the man whom the people of this world were gradually recognizing as the Lord of Darkness. It was as if he was free from all worldly troubles. He'd always been slender, but he'd gotten so thin lately it almost seemed like he wasn't really here. Yet he didn't appear frail. I could sense a certain strength of personality behind his composed behavior.

"I don't really mind," I said, taking a seat on the opposite sofa.

I couldn't be careless, but there was no point in being openly hostile. I had Rose and Katou clean up the area, and treated him like a guest.

"It's still a bit of a surprise," I added. "I figured you'd be staying out of sight."

"It's not like I'm always hiding in the middle of nowhere," Kudou said. "If needed, I personally come to town, just like this. I do bring guards with me, though."

Behind him, one of the doppelqueen Anton's spawn stood waiting, imitating the form of Juumonji Tatsuya. Next to her was the nightmare stalker Dora, who'd come out of Kudou's shadow and was now exchanging stern looks with Gerbera. The dirty sludge Caesar was probably hiding beneath Kudou's clothes too, and Berta, who'd been guarding us all this time, was also at his side. What's more, Kudou also had five guards with him dressed like Aker's soldiers. That said, they weren't human. They were probably more of Anton's spawns.

When I looked closer, I realized their faces looked familiar.

"You had Anton's spawn mimic the palace guards and guide you all the way here?" I asked.

"Exactly." Kudou nodded, then held out his palm to me. "Just let me say this now. No harm was done to those being mimicked. I'd rather you not come to hate me, Senpai. I just had them take a little nap."

He was being rather considerate, at least for him. Much like he said, something must've necessitated this surprise visit.

"I'll release them the moment I leave," Kudou continued.

"Though, I might not have the time for that if something happens to

me. Also, my subordinates are on standby outside the town, ready to move at any time, so do keep that in mind.”

“I have no intention of harming you. You don’t need to threaten me like that.”

“I’m sure you don’t. I trust you in that respect. After all, you’re the one who said you’ve yet to give up on me.”

Kudou’s shoulders shook with laughter. He looked as if he was genuinely having fun. When he was like this, he looked like nothing more than a boy who was a year younger than me.

I noticed that Berta, who was lying on the ground by his side, was looking up at him. She didn’t notice my gaze, too focused on staring at her master. Her eyes looked delighted yet also sad. I knew that Berta wanted Kudou to be happy. Even if he had to meet his end, she wanted him to go gently and not in despair. She knew it couldn’t happen, but she still wished for it.

Seeing her master having fun must’ve been a good thing for her. On the other hand, knowing that this was only a momentary thing might’ve made her feel utterly powerless. Her feelings weren’t reciprocated, though. Kudou paid no attention to her and kept going.

“However, we need to attend to some formalities. You were threatened, Senpai. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Meaning I had no choice in this?”

“Exactly.”

Kudou did have a point. This visit was inconvenient for me, in a sense. For example, say people saw this as my conspiring with the Lord of Darkness, who threatened the world. Any respect I’d earned would diminish substantially. Worst-case scenario, it would seriously damage our current position.

To that end, it was necessary for him to “threaten” me. That way, I could use it as an excuse. Kudou probably wasn’t lying about his subordinates being on standby outside town, though.

“What drove you to such lengths to come here?” I asked curiously.

“To speak with you, of course.”

“Just for that?”

“Yes, just to speak with you. I was really surprised when I heard you got away from the Maclaurin Provincial Army. They even had the Holy Order’s help. I rushed over when I found out you were in danger, but it turned out I wasn’t even needed.”

Apparently, when he heard the provincial army was after my life, Kudou had traveled all the way here. This information suddenly triggered a realization, and I knitted my brow.

“Now that you mention it, how long have you been in Aker?” I asked.

Judging by his tone, he’d arrived not too long after we repelled

the provincial army. That meant...

"A massive wave of monsters attacked the provincial army while they were trying to regroup," I added. "Was that your doing?"

"Yes, well, you got me there," Kudou answered, shrugging. "I didn't make it in time for the decisive stage, so I figured I'd earn a few points that way."

He spoke as if it were no big deal, but what he was saying was terrifying.

"That's pretty crazy," I said. "The provincial army still had thousands of soldiers at that point."

"Regardless, they were exhausted after their battle with you. It wasn't all that impressive."

So he said, but it would be impossible for me to accomplish the same feat. In all likelihood, even among the exploration team's cheaters, very few people could've done the same all on their own. Kudou's opinion differed, though.

"You're the amazing one, Senpai."

"What?" I murmured in bewilderment.

"The power we are granted comes from our wishes," Kudou said. "Back then, in that place, I wished that this world was better off destroyed. In other words, I wished for the power to fight. I took a different path, but by nature, I'm the same as the visitors on the exploration team. It only makes sense that those who wish for strength would become strong, right? But you're different, Senpai."

His tone was both light and affable. I could tell that he was being serious.

"You've become strong," he continued, "but there's something even greater you should be aware of. As a result of your strength, you've had a large influence on this world. You stand in the eye of the typhoon. When you move, the world moves. The Holy Church, grand nobles, and even saviors are forced into action."

"And you are too?"

"That's right. I won't deny it."

Kudou hid his true intentions behind his gentle smile, but his coming here like this clued me in. He wanted to get an idea of how I was going to act next. By doing so, he could anticipate future events. How he would take action, or what he wanted to accomplish, I still didn't know.

"I heard from Berta," Kudou said. "You're going to the imperial capital to hold talks with the margrave?"

Kudou had been nothing but cheerful this whole time. I hesitated for a moment about whether I should explain the situation, but he'd likely heard the general details from Berta already, so there wasn't much point in hiding it.

“Yeah, the plan is to keep the margrave in check by cooperating with the Holy Church and the exploration team,” I answered.

“If that happens, then pretty much all your remaining unresolved issues will go away, huh? You’re slowly building up your foundation in Aker too. So you’re just a step away from achieving your goal, then?”

“So long as everything goes well.”

That said, we were steadily closing in on our objective; our reception at today’s parade gave me that conviction. Considering how, the last time I’d met Kudou, I wasn’t sure whether I’d find anywhere to settle down, things had changed significantly. Time had passed, and we’d made progress. It was surely the same for the boy before me too.

“How about you, Kudou?”

I decided to broach the subject. In a way, this was a good opportunity. After all, I had no idea where he even was most of the time and had no way of contacting him. But now here he was, visiting me of his own accord. I still hadn’t given up on him, so this was a golden chance to try and persuade him.

“What’ve you been up to?” I asked, looking into his eyes.

“The same as you, Senpai,” he answered, hiding his intentions with a smile. “I’ve been acting to fulfill my goal.”

He wasn’t going to open up about it that easily, but I knew that already, so I prodded further.

“Was hunting the ‘fake saviors’ a part of that?”

“Well...” Kudou’s smile broke ever so slightly. He paused for a moment, then came to an understanding. “I see. Iino Yuna told you? Now that I think of it, she came here too, didn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

Iino had told me everything about what she’d seen regarding the fake savior incidents in the eastern Empire. One such story described the thoughtless blunder a group of former exploration team members had made, and how Kudou had mercilessly killed them.

“I also heard you made the Mad Beast Takaya Jun your servant.”

“So you know about that too? There was no point in leaving him behind,,” Kudou said casually.

To his side, Berta’s ears drooped awkwardly. For a time, she’d acted as if she was trying to avoid us—Lily in particular. Kudou’s addition of the Mad Beast had probably been the reason for that. Berta hadn’t been able to talk about it because of her position, but because of her personality, she hadn’t been able to act normal and pretend nothing had happened either. As for her master, he regained his usual composure right away.

“Just to explain, he consented to becoming my subordinate,” Kudou said.

“Consent, huh? Is that how you’re able to dominate the Mad Beast?”

“Exactly.”

Due to the nature of his ability, under normal circumstances, Kudou wouldn’t have been able to accomplish this. It seemed he really had gotten Takaya’s consent.

“Although, the Mad Beast no longer has a personality,” Kudou added. “He’s no more than an animal now.”

“That makes sense...”

I held back a sigh. It didn’t sound like Kudou was making this up. The last show of humanity the Mad Beast had displayed to Mizushima before leaving had been the last fragments of the boy known as Takaya Jun. After losing that, he’d become nothing more than a wild beast. What he was before didn’t matter anymore.

In a sense, he’d had a lot in common with Mizushima. She’d commented that his fate was inevitable, a dark shadow hanging over her expression at the time. It was clear she hadn’t come to grips with it yet, but in her mind, she had no choice but to accept reality.

In all likelihood, Kudou had gotten Takaya Jun’s consent to subjugate him just moments before he vanished from within the Mad Beast. The two of them hadn’t really known each other before then, so it was still a mystery as to how exactly he’d gotten Takaya’s consent. If I had to guess, Kudou had used his obsession with Mizushima, but that was just groundless conjecture on my part.

At any rate, with the Mad Beast, Kudou’s forces had gotten even stronger, which was exactly why I found this odd.

“You said you’d destroy the world, right? You’re the Demon King who’ll kill all of humanity. I don’t see you as being so indiscriminate, though.”

I spoke my honest opinion.

“In truth, if you unleashed the monsters at your command, you could’ve obliterated one or two provinces by now,” I continued. “But you haven’t, despite having the power to kill cheaters who’ve broken away from the exploration team and having the Mad Beast at your command.”

Honestly, one of my greatest apprehensions was that, after Kudou escaped from Fort Tilia and recovered his strength, he’d begin attacking people. However, despite having enough strength to wipe out the Maclaurin Provincial Army, he’d done nothing of the sort. According to Iino, Kudou had seemed indifferent toward the villagers, who’d been plunged into a crisis because of the former exploration team members. In her eyes, at least, he hadn’t seemed driven by hatred. If that was true, a certain possibility came to mind.

“Hey, Kudou. Somewhere inside you, are you hesitating?”

Kudou was also human, so such a thing was entirely possible.

"If so, you shouldn't deny that hesitation. People change... People *can* change."

With everyone's help, I'd made progress little by little too. For example, even the idea of joining the exploration team—whom I'd always been tremendously suspicious of—was worth considering now. In that case, there was no reason Kudou couldn't do the same. At the very least, someone here wished for his happiness.

"If you're hesitating, then you should stop for a moment. It's a good idea to reconsider whether you still agree with that hatred inside you."

Kudou fell silent for a moment and stared at me, maintaining a faint smile. In my peripheral vision, I saw Berta looking up at her master with bated breath.

"Aah... You really are strong, Senpai," Kudou said after a short while, the nature of his smile changing ever so slightly. "You've been strong ever since the day I met you. I'm sure that's why you've managed to change."

Perhaps he was making this expression unconsciously. He almost looked a little jealous.

"The human beasts who destroyed the Colony, no matter how great a power they possess, are endlessly weak creatures," he observed. "You're the opposite. No matter how little power you had compared to them, you were so strong. Now you have power to match theirs...yet your nature remains the same. You're as strong as ever. That's how you can perceive your own weaknesses and continue changing."

"Kudou..."

"But not everyone is as strong as you." Kudou shook his head feebly like a tired old man. "In general, humans are weak beings with nothing else going for them. I was forced to learn that lesson on the day the Colony fell. Even my past self was no different. I've gotten strong now, but that doesn't mean I've acquired the same kind of strength you have, Senpai."

"That's not true. Even you—"

"It's useless," Kudou said, cutting me off with a chillingly dry voice. "My hatred won't go away. I can't get rid of my resentment. I just can't forgive them... How could I?"

Maybe my question had pricked at his heart. A portion of the thin veneer he'd kept over his expression peeled back, and his dark voice resounded as if in an endless bog. At a glance, the serene smile he always wore to hide his inner feelings made him seem indifferent to the world, but that was only how he looked on the surface.

"Yeah, that's right," Kudou said. "How could I possibly stop now?"

I can't allow such a thing."

He spoke as if to convince himself, an air of obsession in his voice. Watching Kudou's eyes widen slightly as they began shaking erratically, I could no longer say anything to him. Behind those eyes was a hatred and despair dark enough to paint the whole world black.

He hadn't changed at all since the last time I saw him. Kudou was surely looking at "something" in the past. Maybe that was all he ever saw. That was why he wouldn't stop. I didn't know what'd happened, but that event must've tormented him all this time. It must've been hell for him to carry that. It was practically a miracle he was able to act so rationally most of the time.



But now that balance had been broken, and he was so tragic. He was on the edge. He put a hand to his temple and muttered as if pleading with someone.

"I'm the Demon King who'll destroy this place. I'm evil. I'll curse this world to my very last breath. I swore to that day... That's why..."

His eyes darted about wildly, then stopped on Berta's figure.

"Oh yeah... There's one more thing I need to do."

Something about our exchange had reminded him of something. His voice went curiously flat, all emotion vanishing from his tone. I had a bad feeling but couldn't stop him in time.

"G-Gah...?!"

Berta, who'd been lying on the ground, suddenly sprang up.

"Gaaah?! Ugh..."

Her breathing turned ragged, and she groaned in agony. She curled up into a ball and fell back down in pain, her paws clawing at the ground.

"Hak, gah... M-My king..."

Kudou coldly looked down at his subordinate as he listened to her cry out. I didn't need anyone to tell me that he'd used his power as the Lord of Darkness.

"Kudou?! What're you doing?!" I yelled.

I didn't know what was going on, but I had to stop him. Someone took action before I could, however. Ayame's fur stood on end as she began barking in anger.

"Graoh!"

Bewildered by the sudden event, we were still trying to grasp the situation. In contrast, not really understanding our conversation, Ayame had simply recognized that her good friend Berta was being attacked. She'd been curled up in a ball next to my sofa, but she leaped into action and spat a fireball in one smooth motion. Her aim was on point; she targeted Kudou's face. Being hit there would leave him seriously injured, but the fireball didn't reach him, because a tentacle got in the way.

"Kuu?!"

Ayame was shocked: the one who'd protected Kudou was none other than Berta.

"Stop...Ayame," Berta said, staggering to her feet and trembling. "Don't...butt in."

Kudou had only given her agony for a few seconds, but the pain was evident in her voice. Still, even in that state, Berta spoke clearly.

"This is *our* problem."

"Kuu..."

Ayame's ears drooped, a sad light in her beady eyes. She was too

young to understand and maybe even felt that Berta was rejecting her. I reached out for Ayame's back and comforted her as I turned my eyes to Kudou.

"Want to explain what's going on?" I said, acting as relaxed as I could. I couldn't hide the slight tension in my voice, though. "You can brush it off as an internal affair, but..."

I took what Berta had said into consideration while still speaking my mind.

"Even so, Berta has been caring for us," I added. "I can't just stand by while you torture her out of nowhere."

She hadn't snapped like Ayame had, but Rose's hand was in her apron pocket, and she was gripping the weapon within. Gerbera was also giving off an aggressive aura. I was well aware that my expression was stern too.

Kudou turned to me, but he wasn't wearing his usual gentle smile. He was expressionless.

"Berta disobeyed my command. This is simply punishment," he said.

"By that, do you mean revealing her true form?" I asked.

During the battle against the Maclaurin Provincial Army, Berta had fought in her true form, something she'd been hiding all this time. For some reason, that form had a striking resemblance to the exploration team's Beast of Darkness, Todoroki Miya, and Kudou had ordered her to keep this hidden. Berta was loyal to her master, so this was about the only act of disobedience that came to mind.

Just as I thought, Kudou nodded. The fact that he knew despite not having been there at the time meant that Berta had confessed when she reported to him about what'd transpired. He wouldn't have known had she held her tongue. She was such an honest girl. She'd definitely been prepared to receive this kind of punishment, and judging by her reaction, she didn't want us to stop him. Nevertheless, it was partially my fault that Berta had exposed her true form, so I wanted to at least put in a good word for her.

"I get what you're saying, but she did it for my sake," I said. "Could you just leave it at that?"

With that, Kudou stood up.

"You leaving?" I asked.

"I cleared the area, but the noise just now might've attracted someone."

"Right..."

In truth, I wanted more time to try and persuade him, and if possible, I wanted to hear about his relationship with Todoroki Miya, who was the cause of Berta's punishment in the first place. I couldn't make that happen at this point, though.

“Well then, I’ll be taking my leave. Please do be careful of your surroundings,” Kudou said. “The world is in the middle of a great upheaval. The exploration team and the Holy Church might not be the only ones involved in this situation. Heaven’s Voice has been quiet lately, but they might take action too. Also, this is still unconfirmed, but it seems the visitors who’ve scattered all over the place are showing signs of movement as well.”

In parting, Kudou left me with words of consideration, but they were directed at me alone. Kudou took his subordinates and headed for the door, leaving only Berta behind.

“M-My king, I...”

Berta half rose to her feet. Maybe she was trying to apologize again, but Kudou walked right past her.

“I have no need for a pawn that disobeys me,” he said coldly, not even sparing her a glance.

Berta froze. As expected, Kudou paid her no mind. He stopped and turned to me once more.

“Oh, right,” he said. “Senpai, when you go to the Empire, please take Berta with you. The other visitors might complain, but you can tell them you pitied my abandoned servant and picked it up as your own. It’s not entirely a lie.”

His words were cruel. He’d previously told me that he didn’t care if I used Berta to her death, but now he was practically saying that he was casting her away for being useless. Even if her punishment was over, he hadn’t forgiven her in the least. What’s more, there was no more room to mediate between them.

“Then if you’ll excuse me. Take care.”

Kudou then left. To the very end, he didn’t look at Berta at all.



“Sorry,” I said to Berta after a few seconds of silence. “That turned out pretty weird.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Berta responded. “It’s not your fault. I disobeyed his order. I was going to take the blame for it now or later. Besides...I’m used to this.”

That was probably true. Still, it had to be painful for her. It was obvious that she was disheartened and hurt by it.

“I’m stepping outside for a bit...” Berta said, leaving the room. She probably wanted to be alone.

I let out a sigh. “What’s up, Katou?” I asked, seeing Katou make a face as if she was deep in thought.

“Nothing... I just think it’s strange.”

“Strange? What is?”

“Kudou fusses over you so much, but he went out of his way to

displease you.” Katou brushed her pigtails and cocked her head. “Berta mentioned it as well, that it was only a matter of now or later. He could’ve just punished her out of sight after we were done talking, yet it was like he put on a show for you.”

“Maybe Berta disobeying him was just that unforgivable? Exposing her true form, I mean.”

“Maybe. It’s also possible he’s plotting something.”

“Making Berta come with us to hatch some kinda scheme? That sounds a little far-fetched.”

“You’re right. I doubt Kudou would do anything to get you involved in any conspiracies.”

Katou readily admitted this, perhaps having thought it through that far already.

“Berta isn’t capable of that kind of thing to begin with,” she asserted. “I’m sure Kudou knows that. In that case, that display wasn’t about some kind of scheme, but...”

Katou sank into thought for a moment, but shook her head.

“No, the rest is just my imagination,” she said. “Even if we want answers, it’s no good to read too much into it. Instead of thinking about stuff like that, it’s better to deal with what’s before us.”

“What do you mean?”

Katou pointed next to me, where Ayame had plopped down on the sofa, visibly depressed. She was trying to handle the fact that Berta had rejected her. Her big poofy tail looked so sad.

“Come here, Ayame. Let’s go make up with Berta,” Katou said, walking up to her.

Ayame raised her head. She didn’t have the energy to jump into her arms like she usually would. Instead, Katou lifted her into her arms and comforted her.

“Kuu...”

“It’s okay. You’ll be able to make up,” Katou told her. “The two of you are such good friends.”

She signaled me with her eyes, and I stood up. I had to deal with what was before me. She had a point.

“I’m going too. Rose, Gerbera, can you come with me?”

“Understood.”

“Of course.”

“Oh, but before that, we need to report the soldiers who were replaced by Anton’s spawn. They’ve probably been released by now and are on their way back already, though.”

“In that case, Senpai, we’ll have to see Philip first.”

“Right. By the time we finish talking, Berta should have calmed down some.” I turned to Ayame once more. “So that’s the gist of it. Don’t worry, Ayame. Berta’s probably feeling down about it too. Let’s

all go to her together.”

I looked Ayame in the eyes and petted her as Katou held her against her chest.

“Kuu!”

Ayame yipped, asking for more. She stuck out her tongue and licked my face; her drooping tail perked up just a little. It seemed she’d managed to cheer up a bit.

I heard someone giggling, so I looked up and unexpectedly met Katou’s eyes right in front of mine. I finally noticed that I’d rudely barged into her personal space, but she didn’t pay that any mind. She just smiled a little awkwardly.

“Okay then, shall we?” Katou said.

“Yeah, let’s.”

I nodded, then left the room with everyone in tow.

Chapter 11: Glasswork

“How are things coming along, Takahiro?”

Someone called out to me as I poked around inside my magic bag. Still on my knees, I turned my head and found Shiran leaning over me.

“I’m just about done. How about you, Shiran?”

“I’ve also just finished.”

Shiran smiled, her face close enough for me to feel her breath. Lately, when she didn’t need it, Shiran had been removing her armor and dressing like a girl, the sword at her waist being her only armament. As she leaned forward, her blonde ponytail came down over her blouse, shining in the window’s sunlight and making me squint.

“At any rate, it’s finally time, isn’t it?” Shiran said. “I hope these talks go well.”

“Seriously.”

Today was the day Shimazu and Iino were supposed to bring back the fruits of this last month’s labors. If things went well, we would start our journey to the imperial capital the following day using Shimazu’s Fairy Ring. We had preparations to make, so I’d been going through our luggage. We’d already decided on who was going.

First were all of my companions. Then there were the few surviving men of Draconia, and Ella. Philip and several Akerian officials were also going to accompany us. Last was Berta.

She’d picked herself back up not too long after Kudou’s visit, which just went to show that she was used to being treated like that. If anything, she’d been more worried about having been too strong with Ayame. Right about now, having reconciled, the two of them were probably basking in the sun in their favorite spot. This would be their last chance for a while once we left for the Empire.

“It’s about time for Miss Shimazu and Miss Iino to arrive if things have gone quickly. Well, considering they’re using the Fairy Ring, they may arrive a day or two later depending on how much mana it consumes. So they told us beforehand, at least,” Shiran said, smiling wryly. “I find it hard to calm down. I know there’s no point in worrying about it. Nothing can be done until we hear of... What is it?”

Shiran blinked in confusion. That was when I realized I’d been staring at her face in a daze. That was a mistake. Quickly coming back

to my senses, I waved my hand awkwardly.

“Ah, no. Sorry, it’s nothing,” I said.

“Were you thinking of someone else?” Shiran asked without missing a beat.

I gulped. Seeing my reaction, Shiran’s shoulders shook in laughter.

“Oh, looks like I’m right,” she said.

“How could you tell?”

“Just a hunch. I suppose this is what they call a woman’s intuition? Hee hee. Maybe I’m starting to understand a little more about being a girl.”

She smiled, resembling a blooming flower. No matter how I looked at her, she was the very picture of a young girl in her prime. Even considering her elven features, she was even prettier than before. It might sound strange coming from me, but a girl in love was such a beautiful sight—so much so that I could barely believe such feelings were directed at me.

“I’m not criticizing you or anything,” Shiran said, perhaps because I’d been making an awkward expression without knowing it. “But I’m a little curious. If something is bothering you, could you tell me about it?”

“Well...” I hesitated a little. I hadn’t made much progress on this topic, after all. But after I thought about it, maybe this was a good opportunity. “Right. You might be the only one I can consult about this.”

“I’m the only one?”

“Yeah. Lily and the others wouldn’t get it... Well, no point in standing around. Let’s take a seat.”

Shiran’s undead body didn’t experience any fatigue in the common sense of the word, but making her stand made me feel restless. I urged her on, and we moved to the sofa.

“Lately, something’s been bothering me,” I started after we took a seat next to each other. “There’s something I don’t understand.”

“What, specifically?”

“This might sound weird, but back when you were with the Alliance Knights, was there anyone you really got along with?”

“Hm? Yes. Quite a few,” Shiran answered seriously, even though she found the sudden question unexpected. “They were all comrades-in-arms to whom I entrusted my life. I was a relative veteran among the knights, so I was close with many.”

“Meaning there were naturally men among them.”

“Yes... Oh, um, that said, not in the romantic sense.”

“I know. I’m pretty sure I know better than anyone else how much of a late bloomer you are.”

“Erk... Y-You shouldn’t say stuff like that. Um, it’s embarrassing.”

She grabbed my arm in protest. It was a somewhat childish gesture, a behavior she displayed every now and then, but her fingertips hadn't the faintest bit of strength in them. She simply touched, shortening the distance between us with affectionate contact. This was the distance between lovers, at least to me.

"Jeez... So, Takahiro? Why do you ask?" she said, pouting a little and looking at me with an upturned eye.

"Mm. Well, how do I put it? This is just a generalization, but..." I started, choosing my words carefully. "For a woman, would you say the distance between us now is normal for a woman when she's with a man she's close to? Even if they're not lovers, I mean."

Shiran stared at me blankly. "Is this about Mana?"

I was speechless. She was right on the mark. There'd been no point in watching my wording.

"Is that what's been bothering you?" Shiran asked. "I suppose asking monsters what a normal girl is like won't get you an answer... Although, I can't say I've lived much like a normal girl either."

Shiran's one eye had a curious glint to it.

"In any case, that's unexpected," she remarked. "I've always watched over the two of you, thinking you're close and enjoy each other's company. Did she do something to displease you?"

"No, nothing of the sort," I answered. "Not in the least. That's why I'm stumped."

"What do you mean?"

Shiran looked puzzled. It was a little hard to talk about, but it was meaningless to dodge the question at this point.

"How do I put it...? It's 'cause I'm a man."

"That you are."

"When she approaches me so defenselessly, it sometimes makes my heart thump."

"Mana is very attractive. Is that not normal?" Shiran asked, looking more and more confused.

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "But that reaction comes from seeing her as the opposite sex."

"Aah, so that's what you mean," Shiran said, coming to an understanding. "I get it. You don't want her to see your response as that of a man, because of her androphobia."

Shiran didn't know the full details of what had happened to Katou before coming to Fort Tilia, but having traveled with her for so long, she knew Katou's current circumstances. Shiran likely had a rough idea of what'd led to this.

"I understand what you're saying, but I believe it's fine if it's you," she continued, speaking as if she truly found my behavior strange. "The two of you have built more than enough of a bond for it to be

fine.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You’re worrying needlessly,” she answered, not a shadow of a doubt on her face.

“I see...”

I didn’t have any words to deny her. We weren’t connected by the mental path, but I sensed something tangible between me and Katou.

“You’re probably right,” I said.

“Then...”

“But I don’t want to hurt Katou, even if there’s only the slightest chance.”

Shiran was about to say something, but held her tongue.

“I don’t want to do that. Never again...”

“Takahiro...”

This might’ve been the first time I’d spoken truthfully about this with anyone.

“Once in the past, I did something horribly unreasonable to Katou,” I said. “That’s why I never want to hurt her again.”

I regretted it. The greater this feeling grew between me and Katou, the deeper my regret rooted itself.

“I met Katou back when I distrusted everyone, right after the Colony’s collapse. Back then, I just couldn’t trust her, even though that must’ve been the time when she needed help the most.”

“But you saved her, didn’t you? That’s what I heard.”

“I won’t deny that, but that’s a separate matter. I should’ve done more for her, yet I didn’t.”

Of course, I could only consider this after the fact, but now that I recognized it, I couldn’t stop regretting my past decisions.

“Katou is a good girl, so even in that situation, she saved us—even though it must have been so hard on her already... Honestly, it’s a miracle she didn’t break then. When I think of the possibility that she might’ve, I feel shivers deep in my heart.”

“Is that so?” Shiran said, nodding. “I always wondered why you’re so indecisive when it comes to Mana, but now I understand. You see her as a fragile piece of glasswork. You nearly witnessed her break, so you can’t help but feel that she has to be handled with deliberate care.”

“You might be right.”

Only someone who’d been watching us all this time could say that. The expression felt appropriate, so I agreed with her. However, Shiran’s next words were far more ambiguous, accompanied by a bitter smile.

“At any rate, ‘a good girl,’ you say? So that’s how you think of her... The glasswork’s heart fails to convey what’s within, so as a

result, it will have to be said aloud.”

“Shiran?”

“No, it’s nothing. Any more than that would be unasked for.”

Shiran shook her head, then put a finger to her lips as if remembering something. “But, right... It’s a rare opportunity to have you come to me for this kind of advice. I suppose it’s all right to help just a little.”

After thinking it over for a bit, Shiran suddenly smiled. Her transparent blue pupil stared right into my eyes.

“Takahiro. You asked whether it was normal for Mana to act intimately with you.”

“Yeah...”

“Unfortunately, I cannot say anything for certain. I’ve always been a knight, so even by the laxest of standards, I haven’t lived like a girl. Plus, the worlds we were born in differ. That’s why this is no more than my personal opinion.”

After that long preface, Shiran gave me her genuine thoughts.

“To Mana, I believe that sense of distance isn’t normal.”

I stiffened, but Shiran kept going as if she’d expected my reaction.

“This is just my personal impression. I don’t know what happened between the two of you in the past. My background differs from Mana’s, so this is just how I see it. Therefore, please take it with a grain of salt.”

Shiran and Katou had very little in common, and Shiran was aware of how little weight her words held on this topic, which was exactly why she presumed to speak about it.

“However, if what I’m saying is correct, then what would you do, Takahiro?”

Those words directed my thoughts to the one thing I’d been trying not to think about this entire time. It was as if the rusty gears of my mind had started turning.

“What would I do...?”

Urged by her words, I hypothesized the outcome. I gave thought to what I hadn’t thought of at all. What if Katou’s intimacy toward me wasn’t normal for friends? What if it was special? In other words, what if I was special to her? That was impossible—that was what I’d been telling myself.

I’d been hell bent on the idea that simply thinking that would bring harm to her, but what if that wasn’t the case? What if I’d only been swayed by my own presumptions to the point where the distance between us had shrunk so much that I could no longer remain ignorant of it? If that was the case, then—

“Oh man...”

I’d frozen for a good ten seconds. Realizing this, I let out a huge sigh and leaned back into the sofa.

"I guess that answer was obvious if I had to ask for advice about it," I said.

I hadn't expected it. It was careless of me to ask for advice without thinking things through this far.

"Given your personality, if such circumstances existed, then there's not much you could've done about it," Shiran said with an air of understanding. "But Mana's feelings aren't the only important thing here. If the time comes, what will you do? What will you feel? What will you want to do? I believe that's important too."

"You're right. It's exactly as you say."

If Lily or Rose had told me this, it would've carried the weight of those who knew of our history, but coming from Shiran, it became entirely hypothetical. In that case, what Katou felt wasn't the problem. The core of this matter was about me now.

If that came to be, how would I act? No. More precisely, what did I think of Katou? That was what Shiran was asking me.

"So? What's your answer?" Shiran asked.

I stayed reclined against the sofa and looked up at the ceiling. I'd never even thought about it before, so I didn't really know. Until now, that would've been fine, but since Shiran had pointed it out to me, I could consider it.

Katou's happy and bashful smile came to mind. We'd overcome harsh times together. Our bond had deepened to the point that she was definitely one of the closest people to my heart. The times our hands touched, the times she acted defenseless... If that was what all that meant...

"Looks like you found your answer," Shiran said.

I hadn't said anything. Was I that easy to read?

"I didn't think I was this fickle..." I said, putting my hand over my eyes.

"Fickle, is it? Hee hee. *You?*" Shiran said cheerfully. "If that's the case, I must give thanks to your fickleness. I'm your third, after all."

"Shiran..."

"I'm joking. I know. That isn't what it is at all." Shiran giggled and took my hand. "This world is far too harsh. Death is always right by us. That is especially the case for us, as we face many hardships. By overcoming these, we all become one with you at our core. Driven to the end of our rope, we seek a place to heal our wounds, to find peace of mind, to deepen our bonds, and to pursue affection from the opposite sex. That is the natural flow of events. What's more, our way of life is approved of in this world."

She wrapped my hand in both of hers and lovingly stroked it. It was as if she were trying to get a physical sense for the feelings we had for each other.

“The feelings you have for Mana are the same, Takahiro,” she continued. “That is to say nothing of the cruelty the two of you suffered when the Colony collapsed. That makes those feelings all the more prominent. I sometimes find myself frustrated that I didn’t know you back then, that the two of you have a special bond because of it.”

“Shiran...”

“I understand that you cannot completely throw away the sense of values you have from your old world. Even so, by saying Lily and the others are your servants, you’ve somehow come to grips with a change in these values, right? That’s why I understand how you might feel that it’d be especially taboo to feel the same not for a servant, but for a fellow visitor. The circumstances and events of her past might also play into why you feel like it would be so wrong.”

Shiran knew the situation more than well enough, hence her accuracy despite it being conjecture.

“However, even if you pretend not to see it, that doesn’t mean your feelings will go away,” she concluded.

“You...have a point there.”

I nodded and closed my eyes. I thought long and hard as I directed my focus to this feeling in my heart. Even now, I didn’t think I yearned for Katou as a woman, because when I looked at her, I remembered the cruel events in that hut and the dead eyes she’d had at the time.

Shiran had said I treated her like a piece of glasswork. Maybe a part of me saw Katou as something sacred that should never be touched. But if that was all a misapprehension, if Katou hoped for such things... Refusing her just because she was a visitor would be stupid.

“Thanks, Shiran. I’ve got it all sorted out now.”

I opened my eyes, now full of gratitude for the girl before me. After having this talk, when the time came, I wouldn’t hesitate anymore.

“There’s no need to thank me. Mana is my precious companion too,” Shiran said, then glanced at the sword at her waist. “With this, I hope I can repay her kindness from back then.”

Shiran narrowed her eye as if remembering something. Maybe something had happened between her and Katou.

Grateful for her advice, I suddenly changed the topic. “Oh, but Shiran, you’re misunderstanding just one thing here.”

“Huh?”

I put my free hand against Shiran’s cheek.

“You said you’re frustrated that you didn’t know me back then, that you feel a special bond between Katou and me. You’ve got that wrong,” I said. Shiran looked surprised but didn’t resist. “There’s no

need to feel like that. You're special to me too, Shiran."

"Takahiro..."

With my hand still on her cheek, I moved my thumb over her soft lips. I traced their contour, and her tongue peeked out to lick my finger. Shiran's eye narrowed and stared at me. The two of us closed our eyes, leaned closer, and—

"Takahiro!" Shiran jolted backward and turned toward the window.

"Yeah! I know!"

It was all so sudden, but I immediately took action too. I followed Shiran as she ran to the window and looked outside.

"Shiran, that was..."

"Someone was watching us. I don't know for how long, though."

"Thought so."

In that instant, I'd also sensed someone's gaze. It was possible they'd been watching for longer than that. I'd only sensed them after their presence became more pronounced. I'd moved right away, but nobody was in sight. We had no choice but to give up on looking for them.

"Did you see who it was?" Shiran asked.

"No. All I saw was a shadow jumping down from the tree."

This was the second floor. They'd apparently climbed up a tree a short distance away to peek through the window. That said, it was far darker inside than outside. At that distance, it was questionable whether they could see anything. Still, it was a problem that someone had been watching us from out there.

"It was a girl with a ponytail," Shiran said. "Judging by her facial features, I believe she's a visitor much like you. I didn't recognize her."

"A visitor..."

I unintentionally groaned. The first people to come to mind were the two girls who were supposed to arrive today, Iino and Shimazu. Shiran said she didn't recognize this girl, though. I hadn't heard of any other visitors coming, and if there had been a sudden guest, the Akerian royal family would've let me know right away. Seeing as how that hadn't happened, this one must've been an intruder.

"We need to tell everyone," I said.

"Yes, let's hurry."

This was an emergency. I took Shiran and left the room. We needed to act as if this was the worst-case scenario—that the intruder was a cheater who was hostile toward us. Just in case, we needed to act as a group.

"Ooh, My Lord, what's the matter?" Gerbera asked.

"We have to talk. Come with us."

For now, I had to gather all my nearby companions. Lily was in the library, Katou and Rose were watching the children, and Ayame and Berta were elsewhere. After I quickly explained things to Gerbera, we went down to the first floor. That was where I saw an unexpected face.

“Ah, Majima.”

Iino was there with Shimazu. They were on their way to see us, Philip and several others with them.

“You’re here already?” I asked.

“Yes. We arrived a little while ago,” Iino answered.

Something seemed off. Iino’s expression looked troubled yet angry.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“There’s just a little something I need your help with,” she said with a bitter look. “Another girl insisted on coming along, but the moment I took my eyes off her, she vanished. We’re looking for—”

“Ah! Yuna-senpai!”

A loud voice echoed down the hallway. I turned around and spotted a petite girl. She wore a uniform much like Iino and Shimazu, her short ponytail swaying behind her.

“Ah.”

Shiran tried to speak, but Iino’s angry yelling drowned her out.

“Aah! There you are! Where the heck did you run off to?!”

“My bad!” the girl yelled back as she ran over to us. She glanced at Shiran as she passed and flashed a grin. She looked really cheerful, and her expression held no malice. “It’s been like, just a few minutes, huh?”

“You’re...”

“I totally didn’t think you’d spot me. Aha. Sorry for, like, surprising you,” she said, then turned to me. “I mean, I was just kinda curious what the rumored Majima-senpai was like.”

“Hey, Aoi? What did you do?” Iino said, glaring at the girl.

“Hang on... Aoi?”

Just as I caught on, the girl called Aoi brightened.

“Mana!”

Perhaps having heard the commotion, Katou and Rose came to see what was going on. Aoi ran right toward them.

“Aoi?!” Katou cried in shock.

Rose had been on guard for an instant, but she relaxed once she saw that this was Katou’s acquaintance. As a result, Aoi had a clear path to her friend.

“Mana! Long time no see!”

“Hyah?!”

She kept up her momentum and hugged Katou.

“Mana! I missed you so much!” Aoi yelled, overcome with emotion.

Iino sighed next to me.

“Hey, Iino.”

“I know. I’m feeling exhausted for some reason, but I’ll introduce you,” Iino said, then turned to me. “This is Mitarai Aoi—the Stalwart Snow White.”



Chapter 12: The Journey to the Imperial Capital

“Nice to meetcha! I’m Mitarai Aoi. In the exploration team, they call me the Stalwart Snow White. I hope we can get along!”

With exaggerated mannerisms, the girl smiled sweetly and bowed. She looked extremely cheerful, as if her small frame was bursting with energy.

“A-Aoi? Really...?” cried Katou, still in Mitarai’s arms. Her eyes were wide as she stared at Mitarai, who looked as if she was going to rub her cheek against Katou. “What are you doing here?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I came to see you, Mana!” Mitarai answered cheerfully, squealing in glee as she hopped up and down, still holding on to Katou all the while.

I could tell how happy she was, but nothing else made sense. I gave Iino another look, and she obliged me with an explanation.

“Before coming to this world, Aoi was apparently Katou’s close friend. I told Aoi some time back that Katou was in Aker, and she’s been thinking about Katou ever since.”

“That’s basically it!” Having finally calmed down, Mitarai joined our conversation and raised her hand, her other hand still holding Katou. “I was so worried, but Aker’s, like, super far away, so I couldn’t really come here. That’s when Yuna-senpai came back from her world tour.”

“She’s referring to when I returned to the exploration team with information about your conflict with the Maclaurin Provincial Army,” Iino supplemented. “When I reported to our leader, he decided to protest the margrave’s actions...and Aoi was his strongest supporter. And then...”

“I asked a huge favor and made them bring me along!”

“She was being unreasonable, and we ended up having to bring her along,” Shimazu said, sighing deeply. She’d been the one responsible for teleporting them with her power. “I *told* her it’d increase the burden on me. I swear, this girl...”

Despite saying that, Shimazu had brought Mitarai along anyway, so they were probably good friends. Honestly, I didn’t like the idea of someone being here when they weren’t part of the plan, but when Shimazu was cooperating out of goodwill, I couldn’t really object. Well, she was Katou’s friend too, so there was no point complaining. I

came to grips with the situation.

Next, we had to get our original plan underway, so I decided to ask Iino and Shimazu about the news they'd brought back from the Empire. That said, if things weren't going well, it would've shown in their attitudes, so I expected good news.

There was no reason to stand around out here, so we moved to my room to hear them out. On our way there, Mitarai joyfully talked to Katou the whole time. She was in high spirits from speaking with her friend after so long. Katou had been taken aback at first, but she also looked to be enjoying herself now. I was glad to see her like this too, and I knew now that it wasn't simply because she was an "important companion," thanks to my conversation with Shiran.

I had much to consider with regards to joining the exploration team, but Katou reuniting with a close friend like this was a good thing. That said, the same applied to me. My bespectacled best friend suddenly came to mind.

Kaneki Mikihiko—after parting ways with us near Serrata, he'd accompanied the commander to the imperial capital for her hearing concerning Fort Tilia's capitulation. If things lined up, he could still be there, meaning we might get to see him if we went. With that thought in mind, our trip to the Empire, which had required so much of our focus and energy, was starting to sound a little fun.



The following day, we set out toward the imperial capital. Fortunately, the Holy Church had fulfilled almost all of our conditions, and the travel plan they'd presented had no holes in it. Shimazu's group had confirmed all the jump points on the way here, and according to them, it was all looking good.

As such, we had no reason to decline, so we started our journey by Fairy Ring. Having gotten accustomed to traveling by now, this method felt strange.

"Okay, shall we?" Shimazu said as she started tapping her heels in a peculiar rhythm.

In an instant, the tremendous amount of mana within her body was released, and the world twisted like some kind of weird joke. I knew that a visitor's power could influence the world—and had already experienced it several times over—but I couldn't help but feel that this was absurd. It was as if I were floating for a moment, followed by an odd sensation of being elsewhere, and then the scenery flashed into something else.

We went from one church to another. The buildings shared the same basic structure, so things didn't look all that different after teleporting, but we were definitely somewhere else. The Holy Church

had prepared our jump points, so almost all the places we were teleporting to were churches. Any village or town beyond a certain size had one, so it was convenient in that regard.

Incidentally, we were now five days into our journey. Our plan was to arrive at the province under the imperial family's direct rule within the day. This would normally have taken us three months by regular methods. It hardly felt real. It was almost frightening.

"What a crazy power..."

I figured my idle mumbling was reasonable. The abilities of the exploration team's nicknamed cheaters, including Iino's, were far beyond human capability. Such was the strength of the transcendental beings who overturned all logic.

"Not really," Shimazu said, having heard me talking to myself. She sounded bored. "It's not all that useful an ability when saviors are expected to be fighters."

"Not all that useful...?"

I grimaced at her unexpected statement. As the Skanda, Iino could close the distance to her enemies faster than anyone else. Meanwhile, Shimazu's Fairy Ring ignored the concept of distance altogether. From a certain perspective, it surpassed Iino's ability in every aspect. However, her personal outlook on her power differed from mine.

"Compared to all the other exploration team members, especially our leader, my ability is no big deal," she said. "I'm self-aware enough to understand that. I'll admit it's convenient, though."

She shrugged, claiming her ability wasn't impressive. Due to using so much mana, she seemed somewhat languid. It suited the "cool older girl" impression I had of her.

"In that sense, I think your ability is far more amazing," she said, looking drained.

"I wonder about that..." I replied vaguely. It didn't feel right to hear that from the person who'd twisted reality just moments ago. "I'm pretty sure it isn't."

As I acted humble, I met Lily's eyes, and a sudden smile came to me.

"No, I guess I can't think of a better power to have," I corrected jokingly.

"Hmph. How nice your love life must be," Shimazu said, shrugging. She looked teasingly at me and Lily, a friendly smile on her lips.

Fortunately, during our journey, I'd established a good rapport with Shimazu. Given the current state of things, regardless of whether I'd actually join them, it seemed like a good idea to cooperate with the exploration team to a certain extent. On that point, it was reassuring that we got along with Shimazu.

As we talked of frivolous things, the people who'd been waiting for us drew closer and bowed reverently. They were the priests and knights who'd arranged this spot for us.

"We've been awaiting your arrival," a man equipped in the Holy Order's armor said to Shimazu.

This knight had worked with the local church to prepare this site for us. When Shimazu came to Aker from the Empire, she'd brought knights of the Holy Order's Second Company, and one had stayed behind at each jump point to get ready for our arrival. They were like the shadow supporters of our journey.

When they informed me of the knights, I hadn't been able to avoid putting myself on guard, but unlike Travis and his Fourth Company, I didn't feel anything unpleasant about these ones. They'd likely been careful with their personnel selection.

"Thank you for receiving us," Shimazu said, bringing her conversation with me to an end. "I'm a little tired. May I rest in a room for a while?"

She immediately asked to be guided to a private room so that she could recover the mana she'd spent transporting us.

"Of course. We have a room ready for you already," the knight said.

"Thank you. I'll be using it, then."

"Sure sounds like a pain," a hearty voice commented.

Shimazu raised her brow and turned around, where she faced the voice's owner, Mitarai.

"Seriously? Have you forgotten who increased my burden by one?" Shimazu said.

"Waaa! Crap! Yuna-senpai! Save me!" Mitarai cried.

"Don't come to me for help," Iino retorted.

Mitarai tried to hide behind her, but it was impossible to get behind the Skanda. Even among the nicknamed cheaters, none could keep up with her speed.

"Owie! Owie!"

Iino easily pushed Mitarai toward Shimazu, who began rubbing Mitarai's cheeks. It was hard to tell whether Shimazu was punishing Mitarai or whether they were fooling around as Mitarai squeaked shrilly. After about ten seconds of playing with her junior's cheeks, Shimazu released Mitarai, looking somewhat refreshed.

"What is it?" Mitarai asked, cocking her head upon noticing my gaze.

"I was just thinking how well you get along," I answered.

"Oh?" Shimazu shrugged. "Anyway, I'm going to go get some rest."

"Right. Good work today."

Shimazu walked off with a priest and a few knights. The remaining priests turned to us.

“And how are you doing today?” one of them asked.

The question wasn’t directed at anyone in particular. It was meant for all of us, including Gerbera and the others who could easily be identified as monsters. The priest’s expression was much stiffer than when they’d been talking to Shimazu, and even the other priests and knights looked wary of my servants. They were no doubt frightened, but we couldn’t do anything about that.

In Aker, I had the reputation of protecting elves from their historical enemy, the Maclaurin Provincial Army. What’s more, we’d carefully mingled with their people to create friendly relations. However, the priests we were passing by on our journey were different. We had no reputation of helping their people, and we had no time to mingle. Still, all things considered, they were controlling themselves pretty well.

Despite his stiff expression, the priest who greeted us remained courteous to the end. “We’ve prepared rooms for all of you, so if you require them, please let us know. You are, of course, free to spend your time here too.”

We were executing our journey by Fairy Ring in three travel windows: the early morning, right after noon, and in the evening. No matter what we did, we had to interpose time for Shimazu to recover mana.

The time we spent in transit was far shorter than the time she needed to recover. For example, we made approximately four jumps within a single window. She needed several minutes to concentrate her mana to activate her ability, but the four jumps together didn’t take more than thirty minutes. Once those were done, we had to wait until the next window.

It was early morning right now, so Shimazu would be resting until noon. That didn’t mean we could leave the church, though. The grounds had technically been cleared of people, so it would be fine to walk around a little, but considering the possibility that someone might spot us, it would be dangerous for Gerbera or the others to go out. At most, we could go to the garden.

They probably wouldn’t question me or Lily leaving the church grounds, but even so, with the current state of things, we had to always consider the worst-case scenario. I wanted to keep all my companions nearby.

Fortunately, churches were built to accommodate a fair number of people. Unlike during our journey to Aker, we didn’t have to huddle together in cramped spaces. It was just a little boring. We had nothing to do but wait quietly. The same went for the dragons of Draconia.

The civil officials from Aker were here for work, so they sometimes used this time to hold meetings regarding the upcoming negotiations. In the end, we all passed the time at our own leisure within the confines of the church. It was different for those who didn't have any work and had no reason to accept such boredom, though.

"I guess I'll take a look-see around town," Matarai said, an excited look on her face.

She didn't need to stay cooped up in the church. Among everyone here, she had something of a unique position, so maybe it was inevitable for some sort of trouble to come up.

"Last time I came here, I found some tasty food stalls," she said with a smile, her ponytail swaying. "Mana! This time you'll come with me!"

During our journey, Mitarai had called out to Katou frequently. Their conversations were generally friendly; they'd been close at school, so they got along well. Nevertheless, in this one instance, things were different.

"No, I'll refrain," Katou said, looking troubled. "I have something to do."

"Awww. That's no fun," Mitarai said, obviously displeased. "C'mon Mana, let's go!"

Mitarai pulled on Katou's arm.

"Ah."

She easily pulled Katou along. They were both petite, but Mitarai was known as the Stalwart Snow White. The difference in strength between them was greater than that between an infant and an adult. Well, even if that hadn't been the case, it might've been hard for Katou to refuse an invitation from her friend when she looked so excited about it. And just like that, Mitarai happily started dragging Katou away.

"Okay! Off we go!" Mitarai shouted.

There was no malice behind her smile. She was being somewhat forceful, but she was just inviting her close friend out to play. To her, this was the same as usual. For example, this exact same exchange might have happened between them had they continued their high school lives, graduated, and gone on a trip to some unfamiliar lands.

Katou was good at looking after others. If that happened, she would smile like there was no helping Mitarai, go for a walk around town with her, and somehow or other enjoy the time spent with her friend. However, that wasn't the case here. "The same as usual" was already a thing of the past.

Katou's face convulsed slightly. She was keeping up appearances, but those who were really close to her would notice the minor change in her expression. Essentially, Katou couldn't walk outside without me

or Rose nearby. It wasn't just limited to going outside either. There were men among the delegation from Aker and the dragons of Draconia.

As Mitarai dragged her along, Katou ended up separated from Rose. That was all it took for her to break down. At this rate, she would collapse the moment she stepped out of the church.

"Wait," I said, knowing this and calling Mitarai to a stop. "Sorry, but I've got something I need Katou to do."

Katou looked relieved. In contrast, Mitarai's expression darkened.

"Awww, that again? You say that every time," she said.

She must've been honest at heart. She frowned, discontent clear on her features. Wondering what I should do, I received support from an unexpected ally.

"Hey now, we're not here to play," Iino cut in chidingly. She was throwing me a lifeline. "Katou has things to do too. Don't get in her way."

"Well yeah, but ya know..."

Mitarai's enthusiasm plummeted. As fellow nicknamed cheaters of the exploration team, the words of her respected senior worked well. Mitarai turned around.

Meeting Mitarai's eyes, Katou looked down apologetically. "Sorry, Aoi."

"Aah, it's fine. I should be the one saying sorry. You're so busy and all."

Mitarai let go of Katou's hand, then clapped loudly and bowed. She was a little willful at times, but she wasn't so selfish as to force her indulgences on others.

"Okay, then I'll be off for a bit," she said, quietly turning on her heels.

She sounded so disappointed I felt a little sorry for her. She said she'd found a tasty food stall, but just maybe, she'd simply been looking forward to going out with Katou. She had no ill intent. Nevertheless, had I let her continue, it would've become a disaster, so I'd had no choice in the matter.

"You okay?" I asked Katou after watching Mitarai leave.

"Oh, yes. I'm fine. I was just a little shocked."

Despite saying that, she didn't look fine—her expression was stiff, and her body was tense. I couldn't blame her for it. Mitarai hadn't meant any harm, so she'd acted without hesitation, but at that rate, Katou would have been dragged outside.

Worried for her, I walked toward Katou, and she approached me too. We closed the distance to one appropriate for friends, then took another step. Now close enough to touch each other, she leaned against me, making my heart thump. She seemed to be unconsciously

trying to find peace of mind. With that, her tensed muscles finally relaxed.

“Thank you...” she said.

Perhaps due to the backlash of the mental stress, the smile she looked up at me with was more natural than usual. It was a defenseless smile that showed her relief came from the bottom of her heart. Knowing that she was letting her guard down, it was poison for the eyes now that I was aware of my feelings.

“Aah, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it,” I said.

I let my eyes wander and met someone’s gaze. Iino was watching us, making a scary face. She signaled me with her chin to come to her. She apparently had something she wanted to talk about.

“Okay then, Katou. See you later.”

Because of what had just happened, it was better for Katou to go to a private room rather than hang around this area where other men were present. Making that decision, I talked it over with the priest, then left Katou to Rose before going to Iino.



“What?” I asked as I got to Iino.

She grabbed my hand and wordlessly dragged me away.

“H-Hey.”

“Just come with me.”

Lily followed along, but Iino only gave her a glance before she kept going.

The three of us went over to the wall a small distance away from everyone else, which indicated that Iino wanted to talk in private. Although, at this distance, Gerbera would still hear us, and Lily was tagging along. In that case, there was someone specific she didn’t want listening in.

Iino came to a stop, then slapped my hand violently away. She looked utterly displeased.

“Hey, Majima, can’t you do something about this?” she asked.

“That’s out of the blue. What’re you talking about?”

“Obviously about Aoi and Katou,” Iino said, her eyes glancing around the church. Katou and Rose were just on their way farther inside. “She hasn’t told Aoi about her fear of men, right?”

“Doesn’t look like she has.”

“Thought so. That just now was because of that too, wasn’t it?”

The reason Mitarai had tried taking Katou into town without me or Rose was that she had no idea how much of a burden that would be on Katou. If we told her, Mitarai would likely stop inviting her. Iino was right, but telling Mitarai was another matter entirely.

“We can’t do anything about that,” Lily cut in. “There are things

you can't say *because* you're friends."

Katou probably wanted as few people as possible to know what had happened to her. Even if it was a close friend...or precisely because it was a close friend who'd known her before, she didn't want it to be known. If she told Mitarai that she was afraid of men, Mitarai might guess what'd happened, which was why she couldn't tell her.

Katou always gave off the impression that she'd figure something out, but she was really awkward sometimes. The earlier incident made that apparent.

"Hmph. I know that. I'm telling you to do something about it regardless," Iino said, glaring at me for some reason even though Lily had been the one to object. "You're not going to tell me it has nothing to do with you, are you? Aren't you a man?"

She was being unreasonable. What did being a man have to do with it? On the other hand, it was true that something had to be done. In the end, I wanted to establish a good relationship with the exploration team members, and Mitarai was one of their top brass, so it wasn't a good idea to piss her off for no reason. Even disregarding such interests, I couldn't turn a blind eye to the situation. Just as Iino said, if Katou was troubled by this, I couldn't act as if it had nothing to do with me.

"I guess we can make something specific for Katou to do ahead of time," I said. It was better to have a reason for Mitarai not to invite her at all rather than have Katou reject her invitations. "We'll have to figure out a way to tell Mitarai about it beforehand."

"Oh, well, leave that part to me," Iino said. "I'll mention it casually. That should keep things from escalating."

She looked reluctant, but contrary to her expression, she was being cooperative. It was unexpected.

"Is this what you wanted from the start?" I asked.

"It is, but don't misunderstand," Iino answered, the displeasure on her face getting even worse. I was starting to wonder whether I was the only one she showed this side of herself to, but that didn't make me happy. "Aoi is precious to me, so it's obvious I'd do this much for her."

"I see."

Thinking back on it, Iino had gone out of her way to return to the destroyed Colony, and had even run all around the world just to help her comrades. As a particularly close friend, it was only natural for her to be worried about Mitarai.

"Well, either way, I'm grateful," I said.

"Hmph. There's no need to thank me. That's all I had to say. See you."

Now that we were done talking, Iino briskly walked away from us.

She was as cold as always. It felt natural at this point, so it didn't anger me, but for some reason, Lily was making quite the astonished face as she watched Iino walk away.

"Lily? What's up?" I asked.

"Aah, hm. It's nothing," she said, shaking her head. She pulled herself together and looked at me. "More importantly, did you notice, Master?"

"Notice what?"

"Iino probably thinks you and Katou are lovers."

"What?"

I hadn't expected that, but now that I thought of it, Iino's wording had been a little odd.

"Oh, that's why she mentioned that whole 'being a man' thing."

It'd been so abrupt, but if she had misunderstood, then it made sense.

"That might be the reason she's always so grumpy," I said. "For the fastidious Iino, maybe she's actually keeping her anger in check pretty well."

"I wonder about that. I don't think that's it at all."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Nope. It's nothing. I doubt there's anything we can do," Lily said, shaking her head and taking my hand. "More importantly, wanna go see Katou? I'm sure seeing your face will bring her peace of mind."

"Sounds good."

I was, in fact, worried about Katou, so I nodded and started heading her way with Lily.

Despite such troubles, our journey by Fairy Ring was going smoothly. That evening, at the church we were to spend the night at, I met the vice marshal of the Holy Order, Gordon Cavill.



"Are you Sir Gordon?"

We met the vice marshal of the Holy Order within the province under the imperial family's direct rule.

"I heard you're responsible for the arrangements of our journey. We are much obliged." I shook his large and rugged hand.

Also serving as the commander of the Holy Order's Second Company, Gordon had ordered his subordinates to get everything ready for our trip. It would've been difficult for us to travel safely if we'd only relied on the Fairy Ring's high-speed travel.

"Think nothing of it, Mister Majima. We should be the ones thanking you for making the long journey," Gordon replied calmly.

As expected of a man of his position, he didn't look the least bit

perturbed by my servants. On the contrary, I sensed something like respect in his expression. According to Iino, the inhuman acts Travis had committed against Aker's reclamation villages had pained Gordon deeply. Perhaps he acknowledged me to an extent because I'd protected the elves.

"The current chaos we find ourselves in cannot be resolved without your cooperation, sir," he said. "It is only natural for us to protect you when you are going out of your way to come from such faraway lands. I swear by the honor of the Holy Order that, even during your stay in the capital, I will give everything I have to protect you and yours."

"I'm glad to hear it. We'll be in your care," I said.

After finishing our greetings, we took a seat.

"Let me cut right to the chase. Can I ask you something?" The reason I was meeting Gordon before reaching the capital was that I wanted to ask him something as soon as I could. "It's about what I requested the Holy Order look into."

"Understood," Gordon replied immediately, having expected me to ask about this. "About this so-called Angel Puppeteer, Ottmar Valhalder, right?"

"Yes. I heard from Iino that you were the one investigating it."

By the time we set out for the imperial capital, the Holy Church had fulfilled most of our conditions, but they hadn't completely fulfilled all of them. The investigation into Ottmar Valhalder had still been underway.

It wasn't because Gordon and his knights were negligent, of course. Gordon had done everything his job had asked of him, well beyond just the inquiry. For example, he'd withdrawn all former orders from the Fourth Company's departed commander, prohibited them from taking missions indefinitely, and commanded their immediate return to the capital so long as it was possible. All those who disobeyed would be severely punished too. Sadly, there was a reason none of this could be applied to Ottmar and his knights.

"Mister Majima, I believe Miss Iino and Miss Shimazu have already informed you, but there is no man named Ottmar Valhalder affiliated with the Holy Order."

One of the conditions I'd set out from the beginning was finding out where Ottmar's loyalties lay so I could identify the person who'd ordered Ottmar to attack me. I wanted to put a stop to them, but I couldn't do anything if that person wasn't part of the Holy Order. This had been an unexpected development for me, but it must've been a tremendous shock for the Holy Order. After all, one of my conditions for participating in these talks had yet to be fulfilled. When this fact was established, some of the knights had gotten indignant.

"Isn't it impossible to find an invisible man?"

"In that case, does that mean he had no intention of helping resolve this situation?"

"Isn't he just looking for an excuse not to come, saying we failed to fulfill his conditions?"

Such accusations had been rampant. It was idiotic from my perspective, but if I were in their shoes, it'd be hard not to be suspicious of the same things.

Gordon had suppressed all such opinions, claiming I had no such intentions, and the two from the exploration team had told them that I was doing no such thing. Iino's words had apparently been particularly effective. Shimazu had told me about it. Iino had spent time with the Holy Order looking into the fake savior incidents, so they trusted her quite a bit. In this respect, she lived up to her reputation as the world-traveling Skanda.

I'd chosen my conditions as the minimum requirements for us to hold these talks, but I'd never dreamed that it would turn out like this. When I'd been told that my "unreasonable demand was moments away from breaking down all chances of peace talks," a cold sweat had run down my spine.

At any rate, having barely avoided an unfortunate disagreement, Gordon had been actively investigating this matter while also handling various preparations for my arrival. He'd looked into any saviors who had similar abilities and searched for their descendants to find any clues that could lead to Ottmar Valhalder. As a result, he'd discovered a few things.

"I heard from Iino," I said. "She says you discovered the savior whose ability matches this Angel Puppeteer, as well as the lineage that inherited their blood. She also mentioned it was all thanks to your hard work."

"That's more praise than I deserve. I simply did what I must," Gordon replied.

"I'm grateful for your efforts. Have there been any developments in your investigation since then?"

"Yes. I visited the family and asked for their story."

Despite being so busy, he'd gone around gathering information personally. He probably had this kind of disposition to begin with, but he was likely spurred by the trust Iino had in him too.

"I'll start with the conclusion," Gordon continued. "I can confirm that a man like Ottmar exists. His name is different, but his age and appearance are a definite match. He was a member of the Holy Order ten years ago."

"Ten years ago...? As in past tense?"

"That's right. After looking into it again, I managed to confirm it.

An entire group of knights was annihilated while out on a mission. Records indicate he was one of them. Our investigation had focused on a man named Ottmar currently affiliated with the order, including the possibility that he was using an alias, but we hadn't thought of looking into records of the dead from ten years ago."

That was understandable. It wasn't as if a computer stored all their data, so there was a limit to what they could search. Their management was scrupulous as it was to have proper records in the first place.

"Everything from this point on is simple conjecture," Gordon said. "It is believed that Ottmar ran away while out on his mission. There are many cases where the dead cannot be retrieved, so all those who do not return are generally treated as deceased. Our opinion is that Travis then picked him up."

"Picked him up?"

"Yes. Running from monsters is a great dishonor for a knight of the Holy Order. The man we believe to be Ottmar Valhalder comes from a noble family, as minor as it is, so the dishonor of cowardice would've been a major problem for them. We believe Travis took advantage of that to order him around. Travis excelled at manipulating others through their weaknesses."

Only that last sentence came out with an air of irritation. The Holy Order had its own set of problems, it seemed, but I set that aside for now and kept my thoughts on the present.

"In other words, Ottmar and his group are former knights of the Holy Order?" I asked.

"The particulars may go beyond what we know, of course... Either way, it has recently come to our attention that Travis had something like a private army that moved on his whim because of blackmail. It wouldn't be strange for former knights to be among them. The valuable magic tools of the great saviors might also have been in the possession of such people."

Ottmar had claimed not to be part of the Fourth Company. If he was part of Travis's private army, then his statement wasn't a lie. Still...

"Senpai," Katou cut in. She'd recovered from the little incident and now spoke calmly. "This doesn't quite click with what I heard from you and Rose."

"Yeah. I was thinking the same thing," I agreed.

"What do you mean?" Gordon asked with a dubious look.

"The Ottmar we met acted like a model soldier," I said, remembering the expressionless face of the man who'd almost seemed like a puppet himself. "I feel like threatening him wouldn't be enough to manipulate him."

“Mrgh...”

“This is nothing more than our impression of him, though. We don’t have any proof or anything.”

This wasn’t the kind of thing we could find an answer to on the spot. In order to be ready for anything, it was best to make up for a lack of definite information by narrowing down the possibilities. It was a boon to find out that Ottmar wasn’t an official knight of the Holy Order.

If that was the case, he was limited in what he could do. On the off chance that he was still after my life, I had official knights guarding me. Having the power of their organization behind us made a big difference. Also, as for whether our guards could be trusted, it seemed that wouldn’t be a problem. I could tell that much upon meeting Gordon.

“I will give out detailed instructions to my subordinates, including what you just told me, and commence our duty of escorting you,” Gordon said, interlacing his rugged fingers on top of the table and squeezing them. “I will also devote myself to your protection. On my honor as the Radiant Wings of the Holy Order, I will protect all of you.”

I could sense his ardor for completing his duty in his words. He conducted himself as a knight much like Shiran did. Not everyone of the Holy Order was like Travis. There were also those who were distressed by the current situation and doing everything in their power to resolve it. I believed I could trust him to escort us all the way to the imperial capital.

Now accompanied by an escort detail, our journey to the capital proceeded smoothly. It was only a little farther to our destination. However, that was when we encountered something unexpected. At the town right before reaching the capital, we saw an army of two thousand men under the command of Margrave Maclaurin.

Chapter 13: Before Arriving ~Katou Mana's POV~

At a town near the imperial capital, we spotted the Maclaurin Provincial Army. To be precise, we caught up to them as they were on their way to the capital. It was a near miss.

This was strange. We'd been told that, based on the time it took to go from the center of the margraviate—the mining city Nourias—to the imperial capital, they should've arrived at their destination already.

Naturally, with exceptions like the Fairy Ring, long-range travel in this world was undertaken on foot. Sometimes unexpected trouble would hamper one's schedule, but that wasn't the case here. We moved up to the upper story of the church to get a better view of the provincial army outside the town.

"There are a lot of them," Majima-senpai muttered as he looked out the window.

The Maclaurin Provincial Army had set up camp outside the town. According to the reports, they numbered around two thousand men. It was an imposing sight, as if they were about to start a war.

"With that many soldiers, I guess it's only natural they'd be a little later than expected," Lily said, sighing. "It's normal for someone of status to have escorts to ward off monster attacks...but that's way too many."

"The provincial army's military force should be significantly depleted after their recent expedition," Shiran said, her expression stern. "Considering what they need to defend their own territory, two thousand should include every single soldier they can put into action."

"Wow, that's crazy," Aoi said, her carefree tone a stark contrast to everyone else's. "I wonder whether they're gonna invade the capital."

"That doesn't sound like a joke..." Iino said bitterly. "They might attack once Majima gets there."

"For real?" Aoi asked.

"The margrave is certainly liable to," Iino answered.

Iino was the only one here who'd met the margrave in person, so she sensed more danger from this than the rest of us. It was definitely an unexpected situation.

"I'm truly sorry," Gordon said, bowing deeply. "I didn't think the margrave would lead such a large army here."

The Holy Order had claimed it could suppress the margrave when inviting Majima-senpai to the imperial capital, so its members must've been breaking out in a cold sweat seeing such a force. After all, we could choose to turn back at this point.

Seeing that we had no idea what could happen, we had, of course, considered that option. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons the dragons of Draconia were accompanying us was so that we could rely on them as an emergency means of transportation. With them, we could use the air lanes, so even if we couldn't match the speed of the Fairy Ring, we could still return to Aker within a month or so.

Majima-senpai's expression was grim—a display of how seriously he was taking this after properly grasping the situation. He wasn't going to lose his cool or flare up in anger for no reason. As proof of this, his next words weren't an emotional outburst criticizing the Holy Order, but a cautious question.

"That's odd... What's the margrave planning?"

He glanced my way. He was looking for my opinion as if it were a perfectly natural thing to do. I was really happy that he relied on me like this.

"It certainly is odd," I said, consciously maintaining my cool as my heart thumped away. "We didn't anticipate that things would turn out this way. We didn't think we needed to."

"Miss Katou, we—" Gordon started, raising his head in a slight panic.

"Oh, I'm not blaming you or anything," I continued, assuaging his fears. "We simply judged that it wouldn't end up like this. I mean, Majima-senpai went up against five thousand soldiers of the provincial army. It makes no sense to come at him again with an even smaller force."

"That's what's bothering me too," Majima-senpai agreed.

We'd had a lot of time to talk since things had settled down, so the two of us had discussed the Maclaurin Provincial Army at length many times. We shared the same outlook in this regard.

"Even if they launch an attack, our forces are at full strength this time," he remarked. "We don't have a train of elves to protect either. What's more, the Holy Order is in the capital, so..." He paused and turned to Gordon. "I don't think they have enough to break through. Are we reading this wrong?"

"N-No. It's just as you say, sir," Gordon said, nodding in a bit of a fluster.

We'd made it clear that we weren't going to lose our temper over this, so he looked somewhat relieved. That only lasted for a moment, though. His expression turned somber soon after.

"We have already run these talks by the imperial household.

Neither the church nor the Empire have given permission for such a large army to enter the capital. Even if they charge and try to force their way through, soldiers are stationed in the capital, and the church has forces to put into action too. If my subordinates in the Holy Order's Second Company serve as the core of the defense, even an army five times that large wouldn't be able to take a single step into the city. There wouldn't even be a need to bother you with it, Mister Majima."

Gordon wasn't boasting; they actually had that much strength at their disposal. They had a reason to, after all. Just as we'd requested, news of these peace talks had been spread far and wide. The Holy Church's authority and trust, the linchpin that kept the world stable, was at stake, depending on Majima-senpai's safety. If the margrave resorted to force, the Holy Order would have no choice but to respond with everything they had. Even if the margrave broke through, his numbers would be depleted, making it impossible for him to take on Senpai's servants. That was why this made no sense.

"In that case, Sir Gordon, what do you think the margrave's intentions are?" I asked. "It would be a different matter if he was prone to such lapses in judgment. Is he, in your opinion?"

"Well... He has led an army since a young age," Gordon said. "He is well versed in military affairs too. I don't believe that to be the case."

"Meaning he knows what he's doing."

It made even less sense, then. He'd gone out of his way to lead such a large force, but it wasn't anywhere near enough. He wasn't the type to make that kind of miscalculation. Also, I doubted he'd brought his army out here just to do nothing. That would be nonsensical. Besides, with only that many— With only that many?

"Oh..."

If that was his goal, even those numbers were enough.

"Is it possible the margrave's goal is to take an aggressive stance, but nothing else?" I said.

"To demonstrate his hostility?" Majima-senpai said with a dubious look. "Just out of disdain?"

"No. In this case, it's more direct."

"What do you mean?"

"We'll be holding peace talks, but what if right before those talks begin, one side displays hostile behavior? What will everyone else think of it?"

Majima-senpai narrowed his eyes. "I get it... The margrave can't reject these peace talks, but that doesn't mean he agrees with them. That's why he's putting on a show to his surroundings that he doesn't consent to this."

He paused for a moment and sank into thought.

“But in that case, it would mean opposing the Holy Church. Can the margrave afford to do that in his position?”

“A reasonable point,” I said, nodding. “However, if all he does is ‘bring an army,’ can’t he make any excuse he wants?”

“What?”

“I mean, he’s not going to attack or anything. No matter how many guards he brings along, that’s up to him. Besides, he can keep insisting they’re just an escort.” I turned to look at Gordon. “Am I wrong?”

“You certainly have a point, madam,” Gordon said. “So long as he doesn’t actually attack, there won’t be an investigation. The margrave is, after all, responding to our request. No matter what the world thinks, he won’t be held responsible. On the contrary, we would be the ones falsely accusing him.”

A deep crease formed amid Gordon’s brow as he groaned.

“That may in fact be his goal,” he added. “If we demand he be held responsible, we would be the ones spreading unrest.”

“What a pain,” Gerbera joined in, dejected by the prospect.

“Meaning we can’t go on the offensive? We just have to sit here and let him be?”

“That’s not necessarily true,” I said. I agreed that it sounded like a pain, but as long as we knew his intentions, we didn’t have to be so pessimistic about this. “He’s done as he pleased until now, so this is all the margrave can do. This is the biggest blow he can deal to us.”

“Looking at it from another perspective, that does sound right,” Majima-senpai said. “I don’t know what the Holy Church did exactly, but the margrave can’t take any direct action. If that weren’t the case, he wouldn’t put a damper on these peace talks in such a roundabout way.”

He stopped to think again, then continued.

“But it’s still a pain in the ass. What should we do about it?”

“Let’s see... I’m not entirely devoid of ideas...” I started, but shook my head. “No. It’ll work out one way or another. It’s not my place to say anything.”

“What do you mean?” Majima-senpai asked curiously.

“The important thing is how the people perceive the Maclaurin Provincial Army,” I answered. “For the margrave, it’s more about how to get people to view the force as he wants. I’m sure he can think up a more assertive way of accomplishing this.”

“How to get people to view them... Meaning he’ll proactively manipulate information?” Senpai sighed. “I see. The impression people have of current events changes depending on how they’re conveyed. Still, if that’s the case, this is pretty bad for us, isn’t it?”

“It is,” I agreed, “but doesn’t the Holy Church specialize in this kind of battle? They’ve maintained public order in this world for so long and all.”

Majima-senpai turned to Gordon, who nodded with a slightly troubled look.

“I won’t deny it,” he said. “The church’s true duty is maintaining the stability of the human spirit.”

That meant that guiding public opinion was their forte. One method for accomplishing this was manipulating information. In fact, the church had cleverly used the rumors of the “fake savior” to cover up the failures of real saviors. They were sure to possess methods that I couldn’t even consider.

“If we know what he’s up to, then it shouldn’t be all that hard to prevent him from succeeding,” Gordon added. “I’m sure the church has already realized what the margrave’s intentions are.”

“Yes. Even I realized, so the sly old church definitely has too,” I said. “Nevertheless, I’d like some positive proof that they’re taking action.”

“Once we arrive in the capital, I’ll go get confirmation,” Gordon said.

“Thank you.”

Now that we knew we could deal with this, the tension in the room finally faded.

“In that case, we just have to deal with it calmly,” Majima-senpai said, smiling.

“You’re right. Getting angry will just play into the margrave’s hands,” I said.

The worst thing we could do at this stage would be to lose our cool. By talking things out like this, we’d managed to evade that outcome.

“I thank you for your consideration. We will absolutely contain the margrave’s scheming,” Gordon said reassuringly.

With that, we left this town behind.



“You sure are amazing, Mana.”

“Hm?”

After finishing all our jumps by Fairy Ring for the day, we had dinner, and on the way back to my room with Rose, Aoi spoke to me.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“About when you guys were going over the margrave’s army,” Aoi said. “You were so rational. I always knew you were smart, but it really surprised me.”

“Aah...”

I figured it out the moment she mentioned our discussion about the Maclaurin Provincial Army.

“Also, you were totally in sync with Majima-senpai,” she added, giving me an extremely cheerful smile.

During our school days, I’d liked this adorable side of her. That thought felt so nostalgic now. In other words, the time we’d spent in our world felt so far away now that it *could* feel nostalgic. A year hadn’t even passed yet, but it had been no simple year for me.

The experiences I’d had since coming to this world had greatly changed the kind of person I was. It would be no exaggeration to say that there was a clear distinction between the me now and the me before. Everything in that world was now completely in the past. It was neither good nor bad; it was all just different.

Honestly, my impression of Aoi was that she was someone I’d gotten along with in the past, but that didn’t mean I was looking down on her or anything. I was happy to talk with her like this and renew our old friendship. In addition, our friendship could help improve Senpai’s relations with the exploration team.

“Senpai has always come to me for advice on an array of things,” I replied. “That makes it easy for us to converse with each other.”

“Mm. You were so in tune. What’s the saying? Ummm... Oh, right.” Aoi’s expression suddenly brightened. “A supportive wife! That’s totally what you seem like with Majima-senpai!”

“Hwuh?”

I unintentionally made an odd noise. Aoi obviously meant that in the sense that we were very much on the same page. Looking at her innocent smile, it was clear that she hadn’t meant anything weird by it. But even though I knew that, that phrase had a particularly strong impact on me. It was enough to make me silently panic for a while.



Before leaving Aker, Rose had given me a push on the back, and I’d decided that I wanted to give my own love everything I had. Looking back on it, perhaps unconsciously driven by that desire, it seemed that I’d had more opportunities to step closer to Majima-senpai and make physical contact with him. It was as if the brakes I’d put on every action I’d been indecisive about were broken now, which made it a little embarrassing.

That said, I was still scared of consciously stepping closer. On one hand, I’d had more opportunities to unconsciously move within a heart-pounding distance. On the other, I couldn’t consciously take that same action myself. It was horribly vexing.

There were even times these half-hearted feelings weighed heavily on my chest, keeping me from sleeping at night. My cowardice wasn’t

the only reason I couldn't step forward either. We were going to be meeting with the exploration team soon.

We'd experienced the Colony's destruction, and living in this world had changed our values. Unlike us, many of the exploration team's members maintained the values they'd had from our old world. Additionally, with the majority of them having awakened to power through unconscious aspirations of becoming a hero, many were virtuous. On the flip side, however, they were shallow and frail at heart while filled with self-righteousness.

I'd spoken of this with the others already. To these members of the exploration team, Majima-senpai's relationship with Lily and the other girls posed a serious risk. If I gave my heart to him too, then as a fellow visitor, it was extremely likely we would provoke their animosity.

Even if Senpai had yet to make a decision, it was better to avoid doing anything that would quash his choice of whether to join the exploration team. At the very least, until this journey was over and we returned to Aker, it wasn't the time to take any decisive action.

With that thought in mind, I stopped my accelerating feelings. In a sense, it was like pressing the accelerator and brakes at the same time. That was the reason I'd made an odd noise when I heard Aoi's unexpected statement. It was because I was a little sensitive about it now.

Seeing me like this, Aoi looked satisfied. Just maybe, she'd sensed something before this.

"Mana, do you like Majima-senpai?" she asked plainly.

This was typical talk between close friends, but to me as I was now, it was a surprise attack.

"Ah, uh..."

If only I could have casually said, "That's not true." My mind knew that, but my body and heart refused to keep pace. Because of recent events, I'd lost control of my feelings. Or rather, being unable to process my love for Majima-senpai had been an ongoing problem for a while.

My embarrassment flared up in an instant, and my face got so hot so fast it felt as if I would catch fire. This was different from when Rose and Gerbera had confronted me about it, though. I'd formed special bonds with those two by spending time with them in this world. They truly understood my relationship with Majima-senpai. Having a good friend from the past discover my hopelessly heartfelt love came with a special kind of—or perhaps an obvious kind of—embarrassment.

I covered my face immediately, but it was too late. She was sure to have seen my bright-red cheeks already, so there was no point in

trying to hide it.

“Wow. Looks serious,” she said in a relatively sincere tone.

“A-Aoi...” I couldn’t look her in the eyes. Nevertheless, I somehow said what I had to. “U-Um, about this...”

“Mm. I know. It’s fine.”

Fortunately, Aoi answered right away. She wasn’t the type to go spreading other people’s secrets, which I knew from our friendship before coming to this world.

“You know, I asked to come along so that I could protect you, Mana,” she said to me as I kept my gaze fixed on the floor. “So you don’t need to worry about anything.”

I looked up and was faced with her innocent smile.

“Aoi...”

My feelings naturally resembled how I’d felt when we chatted in the classroom. I was back to my usual self—before I knew of how weak people were and how cruel the world was. Even if it was just a hallucination, it didn’t feel bad.

“Thanks,” I said, speaking honestly. And just then...

“Mana,” Rose, who’d been silent all this time, called out to me.

I started, and before I could ask what was going on, another voice called to me from down the hallway.

“Aah, Katou. This is where you were.”

It was Majima-senpai. This startled me a little because of what I’d just been talking about with Aoi. I was a little worried he’d heard us, but everything seemed fine. He hadn’t come alone either; Lily and Shimazu were accompanying him.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he said. “Do you have a minute? Shimazu has something to talk about.”

“Sorry for interrupting you,” Shimazu said.

“No worries, but whatcha talking about?” Aoi asked curiously. “Can I hear it too?”

“Sure. Actually, this concerns you too, Aoi,” Shimazu answered, then turned my way. “I’d like to talk about my previous proposal. About whether you’ll join the exploration team, that is.”

“Oh, that?” I said, not particularly surprised by this.

I’d figured this would be the topic if Shimazu had something to speak with me about. Aoi, on the other hand, looked like she hadn’t heard anything about this. She was quite surprised, but not because of us “joining the exploration team.”

“Huh? Mana, you’re not coming with us?” Aoi asked.

This was a little unexpected. It seemed Aoi had assumed that I was going to stay with the exploration team. Shimazu apparently hadn’t told her about it.

“Why?” Aoi asked, blinking in confusion.

“Umm...”

Her question was a little troublesome. To me, I needed a reason to join them, but I didn't need one not to. Aoi, however, saw it the other way around. She hadn't even considered the possibility that I wouldn't be joining them.

Still, she was an old friend. I was the one who'd changed since back then, so feeling a little apologetic for that, I hesitated to say something that would sound like I was spurning her.

“Hey now, Aoi, don't bother her like that,” Shimazu cut in quickly, perhaps noticing my bewilderment. “Everyone has their own circumstances.”

“B-But...”

“Besides, I'm working on it so that they'll join us. It hasn't been decided yet that they'll refuse.”

With that, Shimazu pulled out a rolled-up paper from her leather bag.

“What's that?” Majima-senpai asked.

“I went back to the capital while everyone was having dinner,” Shimazu said, looking proud. “I had a little business to take care of.”

“That's a pretty crazy feat to describe so casually...”

“You've seen my ability plenty of times by now, haven't you? It's not much of a burden for me to travel alone. Well, even on my own, it'd be hard to make a two-way trip this quickly unless I was this close to begin with.” Shimazu then handed the paper to Majima-senpai. “That's a list of exploration team members who approve of you joining us.”

Majima-senpai accepted the paper and froze on the spot.

“I regard you highly, and I'd like for you to be one of us,” Shimazu stated. “I'm not the only one who thinks that either. Didn't I tell you before? I was going to prove it to you in an easy-to-see way. This list is my proof.”

“Is it okay if I take a second to look at the names?” Majima-senpai asked after a pause.

“Of course.”

Majima-senpai exchanged looks with us, so Lily and I looked down at the paper in his hands. Rows of names were present, each in different handwriting. There were about forty of them. The exploration team had sixty or so members now, so this meant at least sixty percent of them were listed here. Among them were nicknamed cheaters like the Multiplex Kubota Yousuke, the Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma, and even their leader, the Sword of Light Nakajima Kojiro. It was quite the spectacle.

“So how about it, Majima?” Shimazu said. “With all those names listed before you, do you get a real sense of their approval?”

“Yeah... It’s more than I thought.”

“I must admit, I did lay some groundwork beforehand to convince the neutral and pessimistic parties. I also had people convincing them while I was away. Well, this is still more than I expected too, so it was a bit of a shock.”

Shimazu shrugged casually, but her eyes were serious.

“If you do join us, I think this list will help you,” she continued. “Even those who disapprove somewhat are mostly just worried about the future, so they’re not opposed to it because they have any animosity toward you or anything. If the large majority supports you, the others won’t really complain.”

Shimazu had prepared for everything far more diligently than expected. Maybe her main goal on this trip was to get Majima-senpai to understand that the exploration team approved of him.

“Things are currently unstable, and the future remains obscure,” Shimazu said. “It’s better that we visitors stick together. For you, and for us, I think it’s best that you join. I hope this list can convince you of that.”

Her tone was sincere as she took the list back from Majima-senpai.

We were getting closer to the Holy Church and the exploration team. Tomorrow, we were going to arrive in the imperial capital.

Chapter 14: Arrival in the Imperial Capital

The next day, we finally reached the imperial capital. We teleported into the Holy Church's headquarters, into a room in the grand cathedral. Feeling a little nervous, I let the still-unfamiliar sensation of teleportation pass, then...

"We've been awaiting your arrival."

In a large and empty room were two men with a small retinue. One was a slender old man wearing the clothes of a priest. His hair and beard were white, and his wrinkled face and intelligent eyes gave him a very mature impression. The other man was a large, middle-aged knight. He had chiseled features that still managed to resemble ours. That combined with his trimmed black hair suggested that he might be of Japanese descent. His bulky body made even the atmosphere feel heavy, indicating his caliber as a knight.

Both these men had an unsettling aura about them. Before we could react in any way, they looked at our whole group and walked toward me as I stood there surrounded by my servants.

"Excuse me, would you be Mister Majima Takahiro and Miss Katou Mana?" the old priest asked. His voice was deep and hoarse, but it was easy to hear.

"Yes, we are," I answered, and the two of them bowed.

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance," the priest said. "I am one of the archbishops here. My name is Gerd Kruger."

"Harrison Addington. I serve as the marshal of the Holy Order," the knight said.

This was a surprise. I didn't think the heads of the Holy Church and Holy Order would greet us personally. Was this a display of how seriously they were taking this? The fact that they had very few guards protecting them demonstrated they were keen to avoid coming off as overbearing.

What's more, the fact that they'd brought so few guards to meet monsters was an indication of the trust they had in us. With that in mind, it was almost unfair of us to bring so many escorts, even going as far as including Iino. Regardless, it was a necessity because of the incident with Travis, so they probably understood. Neither of the men seemed to mind.

"We thank you for taking the time to travel here from such

faraway lands,” Gerd said.

“I should thank you too for taking care of everything for our journey,” I replied.

“I’m glad to see that nothing has inconvenienced you. I believe we must cooperate to break the current deadlock. I hope we can work together to that end.”

After our brief greeting, the two of them expressed their gratitude to Shimazu and the others who’d helped out. As far as I could tell, they all had favorable relationships. They then greeted Philip and the other Akerian officials and briefly introduced themselves to the dragons of Draconia. Once all the greetings were over, they turned to me once more.

“If you aren’t feeling tired, then after you put away your luggage, I was thinking Harrison could go over our plans for the peace talks. What will you do?” Gerd asked.

“We’re fine. Can we begin?” I answered.

“Understood. Harrison, if you will.”

With that, Gerd took his leave. It seemed he’d made time just to greet us despite having a busy schedule. Still, there were sure to be many things an organization couldn’t do with their two leaders preoccupied. Honestly, having Harrison here felt like more than enough.

“I shall guide you from here,” Harrison said.

“Thank you.”

First, he took us to the room we’d be staying in.

“Okay then, Majima, see you tomorrow,” Shimazu said.

Exhausted from using so much mana to transport us here, she split up from us once we arrived at our rooms. After resting for a bit, she was going to return to where the exploration team was staying. Seeing that the exploration team’s leader had done so much for us, I was planning on visiting them the following day once things settled down. That meant I would see Shimazu again tomorrow.

Iino was here as a guard, so she wasn’t going back to the exploration team and was instead sticking with us. I deemed our other escort, Gordon, to be trustworthy, but the Skanda’s presence was still reassuring. If only she didn’t glare at me every time our eyes met, I’d have nothing to complain about... Well, there was no point wishing for luxuries. Mitarai was tagging along too, but that was likely because Katou was with us. If something happened, Mitarai was sure to protect her friend, so it was heartening to have her here too.

We followed Harrison again. On the way, we passed by a window in the hallway, and the scenery outside garnered a sigh of admiration from Lobivia and Kei.

“Wow...”

“Amazing...”

They were both gobsmacked. They were looking up at a spire that shot up into the sky.

The church’s headquarters in the capital was an extremely large grand cathedral with a dome at the center surrounded by six enormous spires. The tall spires looked about as big as forty-story buildings. We were currently pretty close to the ground floor and could look up at the other spires too.

This building was said to exist to extol the greatness of saviors past, present, and future. The darkened white exterior was covered in detailed carvings that depicted their long history. The complex shadows cast by the carvings created a solemn and impressive atmosphere.

The cityscape spreading around the cathedral was also far more prosperous than any I’d seen in this world. When a city expanded, it did so by adding layers of walls. This was where the first advent of a savior had happened, so the imperial capital boasted the longest history of any human settlement. Accordingly, it had seven layers of sturdy walls. The packed rows of houses were quite the breathtaking sight too. It lived up to its name as the world’s greatest city.

Beyond the walls, prairies spread into the distance. No manner of forests that could serve as a den for monsters existed in the immediate vicinity. The closest forest was one that looked like no more than a dark shadow far off at the foot of a mountain. I’d heard of a Dark Woods north of the imperial capital that still hadn’t been conquered, so that was presumably it. It was where the swarm of tripdrills I’d once seen went on their trip from the southern Woodlands.

At this distance, we didn’t have to worry about being attacked by the swarm. Even in terms of defenses, the Holy Order was stationed here, and so was an army under the direct command of the imperial family. The imperial capital was probably the safest place in the world.

“Hmm. It’s my first time seeing such a large building in this world.”

“Indeed. I wonder how much time and skill was needed to create such a thing.”

“I have no idea what religion is, but such a magnificent sight truly is worthy of admiration.”

“Yes. It’s wonderful. I never thought the day would come when I could witness the grand cathedral with my own eyes.”

Everyone voiced their opinions, and as they did, I narrowed my eyes.

“Hm...?”

The sensation of mana coming from a part of the grand cathedral’s

dome caught my attention.

“What’s wrong, Master?” Lily asked.

“Oh, I was just thinking about how the presence of mana here is amazing,” I said.

“Aah, that. It really is,” Lily agreed, taking a look around. “It’s a little surprising, but I guess that’s the Holy Church for you, huh? They’ve got magic tools all over the place.”

Magic tools were used for religious ceremonies too. For example, there was the altar I’d seen in Fort Tilia’s underground mausoleum. With such a large religious building, it was only natural for them to have countless such magic tools. Lily was right. Simply walking down this hallway, I could sense mana from every direction.

The dome surely hosted all sorts of ceremonies and was hence equipped with that many more magic tools. The Holy Church was the biggest organization in the world. Not only did it have great authority and military strength, but wealth too.

As we enjoyed the sights, we arrived at our destination.



Harrison went on to give us a detailed explanation of their plans for the peace talks, but most of it had been conveyed in the letter that Shimazu had brought to us. For example, he went over the fact that the church was preparing the location and all required tools for the talks. He reviewed the state of our conditions as I’d discussed with Gordon, and he told us all about the formal processes for the negotiations. We were totally ignorant of such matters in this world, so we’d already consulted Philip and the other Akerian delegates on what to do if there were any problems. On this point, both parties were going to confirm things in person.

Everything regarding the peace talks was proceeding as planned, so in truth, I didn’t have much to do. Aker and the margrave had negotiations to conduct, but as an amateur in politics, it wasn’t my place to say anything about it. That didn’t mean I could relax, though; we had to make sure this didn’t fail.

The all-important peace talks themselves were scheduled to happen three days from now. This was later than what we’d heard beforehand, but it was because the margrave was late in arriving. Also, the church knew of the army the margrave was bringing. They’d had the same conjecture about his intentions as we did and had already taken measures to handle it.

We went over everything, so it took quite a bit of time. I listened all the while without letting my mind wander, and just like that, his explanation came to an end.

“Do you have any questions?” Harrison asked once he was done.

I exchanged looks with everyone. His explanation was thorough and not lacking in any way, so everyone seemed to be of the same opinion. I was about to tell him we didn't have any questions when I suddenly changed my mind. This was a rare chance to speak with the head of the Holy Order; it would be a waste to end it here. It was best to ask whatever I could.

"Just one, then," I said.

"What is it, sir?"

"What do all of you think of someone who leads monsters like I do?"

Harrison's stern face twitched a little.

"Mister Majima, do you doubt us?" he said after a short pause, gazing sharply my way.

A strong pressure pushed down on me, one that differed entirely from facing a cheater. Perhaps it was the dignity of the man who led the organization that protected the entire world's stability. That said, even if it was small, I led a group and was responsible for them. I made up my mind and returned his gaze head-on.

"No, that's not what I mean," I said. "I came here because I concluded that it wouldn't be dangerous."

If I died here, the Holy Church had much to lose. The peace talks that were so close to being held would go to waste, and they'd lose the chance to correct the unstable state of affairs. Their dignity would be greatly affected by failing to hold negotiations after announcing them far and wide, and relations would deteriorate with Aker. If that happened, it was possible the Alliance would side with Aker, affecting the stability in the southern Empire greatly. Likewise, it would definitely form cracks in the mutual trust between them and the exploration team.

Because of that, I was sure the church would do everything they could to protect us during these talks. I didn't doubt them on that point. However, that was only so long as we shared the objective of protecting this world.

"On the point of wanting to do something about the current instability, I believe I share the same opinion as the church," I said. "But once that objective is accomplished, that won't necessarily be the case anymore, will it?"

I made sure to stay calm as I spoke, and I saw a hint of understanding in Harrison's eyes.

"I see," he said. "Mister Majima, you are looking to the future after these negotiations are over. Therefore, you wish to know our thoughts while we are still cooperating with each other?"

"Exactly."

My goal was, at most, to create a place to live a quiet life with my

servants. The groundwork for that had now been set in Aker, so we were partway there. In all likelihood, this turmoil would be our greatest and final obstacle.

That was because not many people would invade another country, and one in faraway lands at that, just because a monster tamer was there. This world's people didn't normally have the means to consider such acts to begin with. By keeping the margrave and the other powers who supported him in check, my objective would be accomplished. My long journey would come to an end, and all my hardships would be rewarded.

There would certainly be many small problems to come, but those would all be normal, everyday problems, and we could simply resolve them by working together. We really did have just a little further to go.

Nonetheless, if the Holy Church picked a fight with us, it'd be a different story. As the greatest authority in the world, making an enemy of it would easily overturn everything we had. For this reason, I wanted to hear the frank opinion of someone who was in a position to make decisions for their entire organization.

Nothing could be done if the Holy Church was as extreme as the margrave, but if it wasn't, there were ways of handling this. For example, say it viewed my servants as dangerous. We could talk things out here and explain that the girls possessed proper reason. Or say they felt revulsion toward the very existence of monsters and couldn't stand even looking at them. In that case, we planned on never getting involved with them again. In either case, we had to consider how we would handle the situation. The chance to ask them directly about it was very valuable.

"Can you tell me what you honestly think?" I said. "Depending on the circumstances, I believe we should be able to do something. We do not want to antagonize the Holy Church."

"I understand the point of your question, sir. Allow me to answer you," Harrison said clearly. "Mister Majima, I harbor no ill will toward you like the margrave does."

"Meaning you don't consider me to be evil?"

"Indeed."

In other words, I didn't need to worry.

"I also will not selfishly pursue personal glory like Travis did," Harrison added. "All I wish for is to fulfill the duty I've been charged with."

"Your duty?"

"To protect the stability of this world. That is our responsibility, the duty that has been given to us."

I could hear the pride in his voice.

“Ever since I became a knight I’ve devoted myself to protecting the peace of our brittle and frail world,” he continued. “I am sure I will continue doing so from this day onward too.”

His eyes were unwavering. Their positions differed greatly, but I could tell by instinct that this man was the same as Shiran. He was a noble knight who devoted everything he had to protecting the world’s peace. He lived up to Shiran’s and Gordon’s descriptions of him. So long as we posed no threat to the world, we would never become his enemy. Naturally, I had no intention of doing anything of the sort.

“I understand,” I said, sighing in relief and lowering my head. “Thank you very much for answering my question.”

“My pleasure,” Harrison replied, showing no sign of offense. “Do you have no other questions? That goes for the rest of you too, of course. If anything bothers you, I will answer whatever you ask.”

We all exchanged looks, then nodded as one.

“If there is nothing left unclarified, then allow me to take my leave,” he said. “Just as I said earlier, the talks will happen in three days. I’m sure you’re tired from traveling to these unfamiliar lands. Please leave the trivial matters to us and take it easy.”



With the long explanation over, we returned to the room that’d been prepared for us. As Harrison had recommended, we decided to get some rest. It would be hopeless if we got sick on the appointed day. After they brought us dinner, we relaxed for the night.

“This is really good, huh?” Lily muttered, wrapping her hands around a steaming cup. “That’s the church’s headquarters for you. Even the after-meal tea is tasty...”

“Good to hear,” I said.

Lily looked deeply moved. Everything from dinner to tea was in fact delicious. There were signs that the food had been catered to our tastes as visitors too. Such modest consideration showed that they were treating us as guests of honor.

“We’re meeting the exploration team tomorrow, right?” Lily asked, looking completely at home.

I nodded. “Yeah. They’re a bit busy, so we won’t be going until the afternoon, though.”

During their stay in the imperial capital, the exploration team had received nonstop invitations from nobles, bureaucrats, and even priests. This was especially true for their leader, Nakajima Kojirou, whom I wanted to greet personally. Many members of the exploration team actively participated in such social gatherings, but Iino told me that he didn’t like to. Apparently, he always grumbled that he couldn’t continue rejecting all of them because of his position. I felt a little

sympathy for him in that respect.

“Hey, Takahiro,” Lobivia said. She was drinking a cup of honeyed milk, but her expression was anything but sweet. “We’re coming too when you go see the exploration team, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “It’s best to stick together when we can, just in case. I’m gonna have everyone from Draconia tag along too.”

Security in the capital was solid. The knights of the Holy Order’s Second Company were also diligently carrying out their mission of guarding me. It could be said that we were very safe here, but I wasn’t going to let down my guard. Nothing was better than being careful.

“The exploration team, huh? I don’t really feel like it,” Gerbera grumbled. “It feels unpleasant when visitors ogle me.”

During our journey from Fort Tilia to Serrata, at a certain reclamation village we’d stopped by, Gerbera had gotten into a spot of trouble with Miyoshi’s group, who’d been traveling with us at the time. She was probably remembering that incident now.

“Hmph, if anyone acts that rude to a girl, I’ll tell them off,” Iino said, treating herself to some tea.

As for why Iino was here with us as if it were perfectly natural, she was guarding us even during dinner. Tonight, she’d be staying in the room next to us. Incidentally, my servants and Katou were all staying in one large room with me. The dragons of Draconia, Philip, and the Akerian delegation were staying in nearby rooms too.

“Hm? Are you...actually a good person?” Gerbera said, staring at Iino.

“How rude,” Iino said.

“You did cut off half my legs the moment we met.”

“I’m sorry about that...”



“Don’t worry about it,” Gerbera said. “I’m guilty of doing the same thing when I first met my lord. I’m not really one to speak.”

“I also tried to eat his hand, and Ayame blew him up with her pack,” Lily joined in. “Even Asarina sucked him dry for nourishment.”

“Majima... I’m surprised you’re still alive,” Iino said.

“I think the same thing sometimes,” I said.

Just then, a knock came at the door. We hadn’t made any plans, but it seemed we had a guest. Perhaps Philip or one of the dragons was here to check on us.

“I’ll get it,” Lily said as she rose from her seat.

I casually watched her back as she went to the door.

“Yes, yes, coming. Who is it?” Lily said, opening the door.

On the other side was a knight of the Holy Order...and a boy. In that instant, my breath caught in my chest. Time stopped. No. To be precise, it turned back. It felt as if this had happened before.

“Huh?” a foolish voice said from the other side. “I heard this was Takahiro’s room? Why are you here, Mizushima?”

I’d heard that exact line before, but there was a hint of laughter in his voice this time.

“Just kidding,” the boy said with an impish smile, then looked my way through his glasses. “Long time no see, Takahiro.”

I unintentionally rose half to my feet.

“Mikihiko?”

The friend I’d parted ways with near Serrata, Kaneki Mikihiko, was right there.

Chapter 15: An Unexpected Reunion

“You really surprised me.”

Mikihiko had dropped by with no warning whatsoever.

“Ha ha. My bad, my bad. I heard you were coming, so I just couldn’t wait,” he said, cackling.

It’d been quite some time since I’d last seen him, yet his smile made it feel as if no time had passed at all.

“I dropped by outta the blue, but is now okay?” he asked. “If you’re busy, I can come back later.”

“Aah, no. It’s fine,” I said, recovering from my astonishment. I felt joy welling up inside me. “It’s been a long time. You’re still in the capital? I was thinking it’d be nice if we bumped into you.”

I finally got up from my seat and walked over to Mikihiko.

“Well, come on in,” I said.

“In that case, I’ll barge right in...but gimme a sec.” Mikihiko pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. “Before that, I’ve gotta make some introductions.”

“Introductions?”

I looked over Mikihiko’s shoulder curiously, where several knights stood behind him. They wore the armor of the Holy Order but were different from the knights who’d been charged with protecting us.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Mister Majima.” One among them, a woman, stepped forward. “Allow me to greet you as a representative of my comrades. I am Elena of the Holy Order’s First Company.”

“The First Company... Meaning you’re Sir Harrison’s subordinates?” I asked, still somewhat perplexed.

“Yes,” she answered briskly.

“Huh? Lady Elena?” a voice suddenly said behind me.

I turned around to find Iino looking rather surprised.

“Hm? You know her, Iino?” I asked.

“Yes. A little while ago, I had the opportunity to meet her while I was looking into the fake savior incident.”

The Holy Order had dispatched personnel from the First and Second Companies to deal with the fake savior. Having chased the rumors herself, Iino had bumped into both companies. It was plain to see that that was how she’d come across Elena.

“Lady Elena’s the one who told me that the fake savior was

actually real visitors,” Iino said.

“I owe much to Miss Iino,” Elena added.

“Not really...” Iino said bitterly. “I don’t think I managed much...”

She seemed a little inarticulate, which was strange for Iino, who was usually to the point. Something had probably happened that she didn’t want to remember. Well, the fake savior incident was a chain of failures caused by the comrades she’d traveled the Woodlands with, so maybe it was a perfectly normal reaction.

“So, Majima,” Iino said, turning the conversation my way as if to avoid delving into that topic, “how long are you going to make them stand around?”

By this point, she was back to her usual self—her usual, belligerent self. Despite that, she did have a point.

“I hear you. Come on in, everyone,” I said.

“Righto. Then if you’ll excuse me.”

“Pardon the intrusion.”

I ushered the group into the room. With so many people, even this large space was a little cramped. After introducing Mikihiko to Lobivia, whom he’d yet to meet—Salvia hadn’t come out—I guided them farther inside. Lily, Shiran, and Iino came with me.

After we got there, Mikihiko gave me a curious look. “Now that I think of it, Lily and Shiran are one thing, but why’s Iino here too?” he asked.

“Am I not allowed to be?” Iino retorted with a huff.

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Mikihiko said, crudely waving his hand about. “I’m asking why you’re in Takahiro’s room at this time of night.”

“Iino’s our guard. That’s why she’s with us now,” I said.

“Aah, I get it.”

“That reminds me, you two know each other, right?” I said, coming to a sudden realization.

“Before all this teleportation business, I knew what she looked like, at least. We’ve only exchanged one or two words since coming here. I was with the commander when she greeted their group from Fort Ebenus and all.”

As he continued talking, Mikihiko took a seat. Elena and the other knights sat on both sides of him, and we sat across from them.

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re looking well,” Mikihiko said, a nostalgic look in his eyes. “I heard what happened in Aker. I’m really glad we can meet like this again.”

“It’s good to see you healthy too,” I said.

Back when we parted ways on the outskirts of Serrata, Mikihiko had still been a little slim from wandering the Woodlands. By the looks of it, that had completely passed now. On the contrary, he was a

fair bit bulkier than before.

Maybe the fact that he was wearing the local clothing was one cause for his slightly different appearance. He donned leather armor that looked easy to move in, carried two knives at his waist, and kept several other holsters dangling from his person. The holsters looked to be embedded with runestones, so they were probably magic bags.

“You’re looking a little burlier now,” I commented.

“Ha ha ha. Well, I’ve been training. Speaking of, you’re looking manlier yourself, Takahiro.”

We both pointed out the changes we saw in each other. In other words, we’d been doing our best to survive in this world. That said, Mikihiko had heard rumors about what had happened to me while we were apart, but I had no idea what he’d been up to.

“Hey Mikihiko, is the commander’s inquiry still ongoing?” I asked. If he was still in the capital, that would be why.

Mikihiko nodded. “Yup. Unfortunately. That’s why she couldn’t come here with me. I mean, she’s being investigated for Fort Tilia’s capitulation, so she can’t walk around freely.”

“I see...”

“Otherwise, she’s doing good. She’s still Aker’s princess, so they’re treating her relatively well.”

Mikihiko responded cheerfully. The commander’s inquiry wasn’t a pleasant topic, so he was trying to avoid being gloomier than necessary. In truth, Shiran looked relieved to hear this. Keenly noticing her reaction, Mikihiko smiled at her.

“She was worried about you too, so I’ll tell her you’re doing well,” he said.

“Thank you very much,” Shiran said, bowing her head.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Mikihiko replied with a casual wave. “By the way, the rest of the Alliance Knights are pretty much in the same boat. They’re rather bored, though.”

“As long as they’re doing well,” I said, a little relieved myself.

We’d fought side by side with the Alliance Knights at Fort Tilia. They had also supported us on our journey to Serrata, so I’d been worried about them all this time.

“In any case, this whole thing has been taking a long time,” I said.

“Sure has.” Mikihiko grimaced, unable to hide how fed up he was with it. “After bringing us here, the margrave scurried back to his own territory. Then the inquiry started in the castle. They droned on and on about responsibility for this and responsibility for that. It’s such a pain in the ass. Also, lately, even bothering with the inquiry at all has kinda flown out the window.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Oh, come on. It’s you and the margrave, Takahiro. The whole

place is busy 'cause of you, so the schedule for her inquiry got pushed back."

I was speechless. I knew that my quarrel with the margrave was having a great impact on the world, but it seemed to have had an unexpected effect too.

"Well, you know...sorry about that," I said.

"Ha ha. You don't gotta apologize. It's not your fault or nothing."

Still, as one of the concerned parties, I couldn't remain indifferent about it.

Knowing that I felt that way, Mikihiko added in a light tone, "Well, that's the gist of it, so I've been stuck here in the capital. And, I mean, sitting on my ass is kinda pointless, yeah? I'd be a total NEET like that. So I thought about it and wondered whether there was something I could do."

"And what's that?"

"A job I can handle," he said, holding up a finger. "Specifically, suppressing monsters."

"You?"

That was a little surprising. The Mikihiko I knew wasn't at the level where he could put up a real fight against monsters. However, now that I thought of it, maybe it wasn't all that surprising. A fair amount of time had passed since we'd parted ways—several times longer than the period from when I first met Lily in the Depths to when I was able to fight monsters in Fort Tilia. Mikihiko had his own inherent ability in Aerial Knight too, so it wasn't all that strange that he could fight now.

"You sound surprised. I've been training too. Well, truthfully, I've only just gotten to the level where I can fight a monster one-on-one."

Mikihiko acted as if it were nothing, but it must've taken a significant amount of effort. He had more than enough of a reason and passion to back that up too. What's more, fighting monsters was typically done in groups, so being able to fight one on his own made him very valuable. So long as he prepared properly, he could play a more than active role.

"Naturally, I've been handling things close to the capital, but I've also traveled relatively far too," he added. "I mean, when it comes to barging into the commander's inquiry, having achievements under my belt really does make a big difference."

"I see."

In his own way, Mikihiko had been putting a lot of thought into this. In all likelihood, he hadn't been able to sit still while the commander was being investigated. It was just like him to find something that he could do for his sweetheart's sake.

"So that's why you're with the Holy Order?" I asked.

“Basically, yeah,” Mikihiko said. “Knights and saviors come as a set by default for suppressing monsters. I’m not planning on rocking that boat. Looks like some idiots who didn’t get that left the exploration team and caused that whole fake savior ruckus, but I’m not gonna make the same mistake.”

As usual, he was harsh on the exploration team, but it *was* their fault that the margrave had an excuse to treat me as the fake savior, so I didn’t feel like arguing their case either. That was my own opinion on the matter, though.

Mikihiko’s gaze drifted to Iino at my side. “Uhhh, what?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Iino said bluntly, looking like she wanted to say something.

“No point glaring at me. It’s all true,” Mikihiko said, scowling.

“That’s why I didn’t say anything,” Iino retorted.

She understood it, but her feelings of comradery still remained, so she had been somewhat put off by the conversation. Not much we could do about that. It turned out that, much like me, Mikihiko didn’t quite get along with Iino. And just by the fact that he was my best friend, maybe it was natural that she didn’t care for him either.

“That’s mostly how things have been going on my end,” Mikihiko said, turning to me and pulling himself back together.

“Right. I’ve got the general idea.”

Discounting the delay to the commander’s inquiry, Mikihiko had been doing what he could without any particular problems. I was glad to hear about my best friend’s efforts during our time apart.

“You really have been giving it your all,” I said.

“Heh heh. Sure have,” Mikihiko said, rubbing the tip of his nose bashfully. Still, he wasn’t the type of guy to stay quiet at this point. “When I go out to suppress monsters, it gets awfully lonely not being able to see the commander, though. But, ya know, it’s kinda like going out to earn cash for the family, right? Ooh... A family with the commander! That’s got a great ring to it!”

“I’m pretty sure that’s wishful thinking,” I quipped.

“Wah?! How can you say that so calmly?!”

“I mean, have you got that kinda mood going with her at all yet?”

“I haven’t! It’s the thought that counts! The thought!”

“Aah, so you haven’t.”

“Goddammit! I can’t accept this! I get it! But goddammit!”

He totally hammed up how vexed he was. Even this silly exchange was mysteriously soothing to my heart.

After that, I briefly reviewed what’d happened to us, then we talked about how life was in Aker. Mikihiko was planning on moving there once the commander’s inquiry was over, so he was endlessly

curious about it. Our conversation went on for about an hour or so.

“Mister Mikihiko, it’s about time...” Elena said once we reached a good stopping point.

“Aah, I guess we’ve chattered away for a while, huh?” Mikihiko said, looking out the window. He narrowed his eyes behind his glasses regretfully, then turned to me. “Oh yeah, what’re your plans after this?”

“We’ve got the peace talks with the margrave in three days,” I answered. “We’re going to get ready for it the day after tomorrow. Also, tomorrow afternoon, we’re going to drop by to see the exploration team.”

“The exploration team? Hmm, sounds like a pain.”

“Now that I think of it, you’ve been totally independent of them, right?” I asked, suddenly curious about it.

Iino and Shimazu hadn’t known that Mikihiko was here in the capital, so it was the only conclusion I could draw.

“Well, they’ve got nothing to do with me,” Mikihiko answered indifferently. He could be really dry at times like this, but he wasn’t wrong or anything. “There’s no rule that Japanese people gotta stick together when abroad, yeah? The same goes for you. If you weren’t all chummy with Iino there, you’d have no reason to get involved with the exploration team either.”

“What?” Iino cut in. “I’m not *chummy* with Majima or anything.”

“Huh? Really?” Mikihiko looked at both me and Iino in turn, seeming to find this extremely strange.

“What?” Iino protested.

“Oh, nothing,” Mikihiko answered a beat later, scratching his cheek. “I mean, you’re with him so late at night, so I figured...”

“I’m his guard. We told you that earlier.”

“Aah. Right. Right...” Mikihiko nodded, then got back on track. “Anyhoo, you’re meeting the exploration team tomorrow afternoon. So what’s in store for the morning?”

“My morning’s open,” I answered.

If I worried about things too much, I’d be too tired for the main event. Our environment had changed drastically from the long journey—not that it actually felt that long—so in an effort to avoid getting sick, I planned on resting the following morning.

“If nothing’s going on, I was thinking of maybe exercising a little by sparring with Lily or Rose or something,” I added.

“I see. That works out perfectly,” Mikihiko said with a smile.

“How so?” I asked curiously.

“Nothing, nothing.” Mikihiko shook his head. “Hey Takahiro, I’ve got a li'l request. Can you keep that time slot open for me?”

“I don’t mind. Do you need something?” I asked.

“No, I just wanna come play,” Mikihiko said, scratching his cheek awkwardly. “I mean, we got to see each other again and all, but I understand if you can’t...”

There was no way I was going to refuse him, so I promptly said yes. I also wanted to chat with my best friend after finally reuniting with him.

“Right on. See ya tomorrow then, Takahiro.”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow.”

After an exchange that would’ve been perfectly normal for us before we were teleported to this world, Mikihiko left smiling. It was an unexpected reunion, but we now knew about the commander’s current situation, and I got to see that Mikihiko was doing well. Three days before the peace talks, spending time like this felt like a weight off my heart.

Chapter 16: The Mist Woman's Feelings

I fell asleep, and before I knew it, I came to this world once more. A city I'd lived in before teleporting to another world spread out before my eyes. I was seeing it in my sleep, but this wasn't a dream. This world existed inside me—it was the place I believed was created by the evolution of my ability.

"I figured I'd end up here again, but..." I mumbled to myself and let out a sigh. I never thought it'd happen the day I arrived in the imperial capital.

I was standing in the parking lot of a familiar convenience store that was on my path to school. Maybe this was a continuation of the last time I was here? I couldn't tell. I still had a lot of questions regarding this phenomenon.

"Oh, you've come again, my dear," a happy voice said.

Mist appeared out of nowhere and took the shape of a person. I'd met her last time too, so I wasn't surprised.

"Salvia, have you been here the whole time?" I said.

"Yes," she answered, a bubbly smile on her face.

Lately, she hadn't been showing herself in the real world.

"Aren't you bored all on your own in here?" I asked, walking up to her.

"Not at all. Little Asarina drops by once in a while too."

"Ssster!"

Asarina lunged out the back of my hand and purred energetically. It seemed the two of them had been spending time together in here without my knowing it.

"Besides, this world is filled with things I've never seen, so it's rather interesting," Salvia added cheerfully. She then knelt down and poked the asphalt. "I was really surprised when I first came here. The majority of the earth in your world is made of stone."

"Aah, that's not quite right. This is just paved."

"Oh? Is that so?" Salvia said, putting a hand to her mouth bashfully. "I was completely under the impression that... I mean, there's more covered ground than not."

"That's 'cause we're in the middle of the city. If you go toward the mountain, it's the same as the other world. Have you not gone that far out?"

“Well...” Salvia replied a little vaguely. It looked like she sank into thought for a moment, but she stood back up before I could say anything. “So this is where you lived before, my dear?”

She looked around as if deeply moved by it all. To me, the sight was familiar and nostalgic, but for her, it was different.

“That’s right,” I answered. “I went down this path every day to go to high school.”

“High school?”

“It’s like an academy meant for people around my age. Does that make sense?”

“Academies I know of. Humans have them in our world too. Scholars who work in such places have ventured into the world of mist. I can’t really imagine what they’re like, though.” Salvia put a hand to her chin and gave it some thought. “I’m sure it’s, like, really amazing.”

“I don’t know what you just imagined, but you’re probably wrong.”

“Oh my. Then what kind of place is it?” she asked, turning a smile my way.

She looked enthralled, so I thought it over for a bit, then inclined my head.

“It’s hard to put into words...” I said.

Salvia didn’t know anything about this world. She’d looked around this area, so she might’ve seen it already but didn’t know what to call it. It was difficult to explain it to someone like that. Not that there was any need to in the first place.

“Oh well, if you’re interested, wanna go take a look? We could walk there,” I suggested.

A picture was worth a thousand words. I usually commuted by bike, but it wasn’t too far to walk.

“That sounds wonderful,” Salvia said, happily clapping her hands in front of her chest. “But is that all right with you?”

“I’ve got the time and all.”

I was sleeping in the real world, so it wasn’t as if I could do anything else. Nothing was stopping me from guiding her to school in something like a dream.

“In that case, can you show me the way?” she said. “Hee hee, I’m looking forward to it.”

I started walking down the path with Salvia. From our current location, the high school was about a thirty-minute walk away. Considering the distance, I could’ve gone to get a bike, but Salvia said she preferred to walk, so I went along with her request. I didn’t have to make it in time for class or anything, so we had no reason to rush.

“It’s pretty rare to get to spend time with you like this,” I

commented.

“Now that you mention it, you’re right. I can’t come out all that often, after all.”

To manifest in the real world, Salvia had to expend the mana she stockpiled for creating the Misty Lodge. She couldn’t just come out all the time, and those precious opportunities were typically reserved for cases when I was in danger.

“When I think of it like that, maybe this is a good opportunity,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re always the one helping me out, and I never get to repay you.”

Before all this, when the Travis variant of Holy Water attacked me in the world of light, Salvia and Asarina had joined forces to save me. Salvia had also stopped me when I was on the brink of casting away everything about myself to fulfill my wish when I crushed Travis. Before all that, if not for the power of the Misty Lodge that I borrowed from her through our contract, we would’ve been completely helpless more than a few times. I didn’t like the idea of being unable to repay her for it.

“I hope I can help you enjoy yourself here, even if only a little,” I said.

“Yes, I’m looking forward to it,” Salvia said, smiling sweetly. “But you don’t really have to worry about it, you know? I mean, I’m always enjoying myself.”

“Huh?”

“You misunderstand one thing, my dear.” Salvia came to a stop. I also stopped to turn around, and she faced me with a gentle smile. “The dream you all share is truly beautiful. I want to cheer you on. I want to watch over you. If you’re in trouble, I want to reach out and help you. As the Misty Lodge, I am the magic that creates a world where wishes are granted... In the end, perhaps that is just my nature.”

She shrugged as if to say there was no helping it, yet she didn’t seem all that dissatisfied with it either.

“That’s why it’s so fun to be with all of you,” she continued.

“You’ve repaid me plenty... Oh, also, this is a first for me.”

She narrowed her eyes as if recalling the past.

“I’ve wandered the world for many, many years,” she said.

“During that time, I’ve had many encounters. However, I’m something like a dream limited to but a few days. I’ve always had to part ways with those I met right away.”

Salvia could only muster the power to appear in the world once every few decades. She could also only do it for a few days at a time.

If she were just a magical phenomenon, that wouldn't be much of a problem, but she'd awoken to a will. What's more, she enjoyed socializing with others by nature, so surely she disliked spending decades in solitude at a time. Maybe that was why she was able to smile so happily now.

"I've always been an onlooker—one who appears, grants, and vanishes. But that isn't the case now. I'm not an onlooker; I'm a proper member of the group. Just like you, I'm able to work hard for my own dream. By forming a contract with you like this, I can come with you on your journey. I've been so happy lately. Just that is enough to fill my heart."

Salvia sighed deeply as if exhaling the emotions filling her chest.

"That's why getting to monopolize you like this today is almost too good to be true," she said.

She was probably being serious. I knew this, so I shook my head.

"That's not true," I said. "We'll have all the opportunities we want. Until now, and from today onward, we'll always be together."

After a pause, Salvia smiled gently.

"You're right. In that case, would you show me around today?"

My answer to that had long been decided.



After that, we headed toward the school as we chatted.

"Asarina comes here every now and then, right? What do you two do?" I asked.

"We mostly explore the area. Asarina can freely move around in here. She's back in your hand now, though... Maybe that's because it's comfortable there?"

"Sster!"

"Also, sometimes I listen to her requests."

"Requests? From Asarina?" I said.

"That's right. Hee hee. The details are a secret."

"What's with that?"

"It's a secret, right?"

"Ssster."

We continued talking and walked down the hill, then crossed the road without having to wait for the signal. Seeing the two-lane road, Salvia cocked her head.

"That's an awfully wide road," she said. "Are there so many people walking around that it needs to be that wide?"

"Oh, not at all. This road is meant for cars. Pedestrians use the sidewalk we're on."

With no knowledge of automobiles, it was easy to make that mistake.

“Aah, so this is the walkway,” Salvia said with a sigh. “I was wondering why we were walking on the edge of such a wide path.”

“I never thought of it like that...”

If cars were driving about, Salvia might’ve figured it out. Her misunderstanding could only be made because this was my internal world.

“Now that you say that, you have a point,” I said. “It’s perfectly safe with no cars around, and we don’t have to worry about traffic laws, so we can walk in the middle of the road too.”

I’d gone down the sidewalk without questioning it, but from the perspective of someone who didn’t know, maybe that was pretty peculiar.

“What do you wanna do?” I asked. “Wanna try walking on the road instead?”

Salvia put a hand to her cheek and thought it over, then shook her head.

“No. Let’s not. I’m sure it’ll be more wonderful to follow your world’s rules, my dear.”

“Is that how it works?”

“It is.”

Salvia grinned. Now that I thought of it, normally she moved around by floating in the air, but here she was walking. Maybe this was another way she was emulating the ways of this world. She seemed to be enjoying herself, even if we were only walking around. She was full of interest whenever I explained anything to her. Because of that, our pace was slow and we stopped a lot, but we weren’t in a rush, so we took our time.

As we walked on, I told Salvia about the current situation in the real world. I spoke of our arrival in the imperial capital and how we’d met with the Holy Church. I then told her of my reunion with Mikihiko.

“Aah, Mikihiko. Is he the friend you’ve had since middle school?” she asked.

“Yeah. We were stuck together whether we liked it or not. We were classmates in high school too.”

“So you two spent time together in this school we’re headed to, yes?” Salvia’s eyes were sparkling with interest. “Hee hee. I’m looking forward to it. I wonder what kind of place it is?”

“You’re acting like it’s parents’ day,” I said, smiling wryly, then realized she wouldn’t get the reference.

“Parents’ day? What’s that?” she asked, full of curiosity, just as expected.

“Uhh, let’s see... Normally, school takes place in classrooms...in big rooms where students take lessons from a single teacher. But on

parents' day, they call in the students' guardians to watch the students engage in their classes."

"Hmm. So that's parents' day. It certainly is similar to this," Salvia said, then suddenly peered into my eyes. "But using that example, wouldn't that make me your guardian?"

I was speechless.

"I'm so happy you think of me that way," she said, looking like she was in a strangely good mood.

"Don't tease me too much..." I said, awkwardly averting my eyes.

"Oh my, how unfortunate," Salvia said jokingly, then pulled away from me.

Still, I got the impression she was being a little serious, so I ended up returning her gaze. Noticing this, she smiled back at me. For that one instant, I saw a certain emotion pass across her eyes. Just maybe, what she'd said wasn't a joke at all. The reason I felt that way was likely because I'd just heard how she felt about us.

"What is it?" Salvia asked, inclining her head.

"No, it's nothing."

It would be rude of me to ask her about it directly and also weirdly embarrassing. I wasn't sure why I felt that way, though.

"We take a right here."

So instead, I gave directions and turned the corner. I then came to an unexpected and obligatory stop.

"What the..."

The path that should've been there had disappeared.

Chapter 17: Black Loss, White Reconstitution

There was no path, but it wasn't because of something obvious like construction work blocking the road. This was *my* world, so that sort of thing wouldn't happen. The lack of a path was something wholly different.

Before me, the entire region, including the road, was pitch black. It was as if someone had accidentally spilled black ink on a landscape painting. That said, it wasn't a simple black that just absorbed light. It was a dreary and empty black, as if the world itself was falling apart.

"What is this?"

The world quite literally came to an end here. It didn't exist beyond this point, even though there was no reason it shouldn't.

"This is where..."

It was where the path that led to my school was supposed to be. Just as I tried to say that, I realized something. The path I'd taken every day was supposed to be full of familiar scenery to me, even if I hadn't paid much attention as I cycled along on my bike. However, right now, I couldn't remember what it looked like at all. That was exactly why I understood what was going on.

"I guess that makes sense... This is *my* world."

I'd seen it as such from the very beginning, so it wasn't all that hard to figure out.

"Meaning the pieces that are missing from my memory have fallen apart."

I'd been warned about this before. My once-human soul was losing its original shape, eroding in the process. My inherent ability also took memories of my old world away, a loss that was reflected in this world.

"Master..."

"Ssster?"

Salvia and Asarina called out to me in consideration. I smiled bitterly, feeling a little ridiculous.

"Salvia, you knew about this?"

When I'd asked her if she hadn't looked around that far, Salvia had looked slightly uneasy. Now I understood that she'd done so because she knew. It wasn't that she didn't try to go very far; it was that she couldn't. This world was likely far smaller than I'd thought it

was. It was chipping apart, vanishing, and breaking. The familiar path we'd been taking had no abnormalities, but if we took one step to the side, there would surely be nothing there. In fact, even the route to school I'd taken every day was in this sorry state.

I already knew this—I'd resolved myself for it—but when it was displayed before me so evidently, I wasn't strong enough to remain indifferent. My lost memories painted this world black. What would happen once the entire world was black? The sight was more than enough for me to predict an answer to that question.

Still, I had expected this, which was why I stood frozen for only an instant. However, even in that instant, someone moved.

"It's all right, my dear," Salvia said, stepping in front of me.

Her steps were light. The sight before us was bleak, but it was as if she paid it no mind. She hunched down and reached a finger out to touch the missing land.

"What are—"

In the middle of my questioning what she was doing, a phenomenon occurred.

"Mist...?" I muttered.

Mist poured out of Salvia's body. It spread out like a whirlwind and grew denser. At the same time, the presence of mana grew more prominent. After dispersing somewhat, it then started concentrating in one place, right at Salvia's fingertip.

"The greatest illusion magic can trick the world itself, rewriting reality," she said as mist continued gathering at the spot she was touching. "Such is the Misty Lodge. I'll demonstrate its power here and now."

The white mist filled in the missing black of the world. At the same time, the mist replaced the scenery, reconstructing what was lost. It was just like a dream.

"That about does it," Salvia remarked.



By the time she stood back up, the path had been rebuilt. A line of trees stood in the plaza behind the municipal office, and a road ran alongside it. Yes. This was what it looked like. The moment that thought came to mind, I realized my memories had returned.

“How...?”

“How can I do that?” Salvia finished for me, linking her hands behind her back and turning my way. “You’re asking the wrong question, my dear. This is the type of being I am to begin with.”

Now that she mentioned it, she’d said the same thing earlier. She’d explained her nature to me when we first met. Magic that made impossible wishes a reality—that was what the Misty Lodge truly was. In that case, maybe this was, in fact, Salvia’s primary function.

“Just kidding. Maybe I played it up a bit too much,” Salvia said, smiling bashfully. “I confess, it isn’t always this easy. This is a very familiar place to you, so that made it much simpler. In the real world, the magic will come undone and return to normal, but once things are reconstituted here—once you remember—the world stabilizes. Normally, I need to continue doing it until it stabilizes fully, but it looks like that’s unnecessary this time.”

Her confession guided me to a certain conclusion.

“Have you been doing this the whole time you’ve been here?” I asked. “Is that why you haven’t come out lately?”

For the sake of restoring what’d been lost, she’d recreated what was gone and stopped things from breaking. Nevertheless, doing so required a significant amount of mana. If she was here restoring this world, then the mana she was meant to be stockpiling was definitely being exhausted instead.

“Just for me...”

“You can’t think of it that way, my dear,” Salvia said, cutting me off. Her gentle eyes captured my gaze. “Please don’t say that.”

Her words held a mysterious power that prevented me from saying any more.

After seeing me fall silent, Salvia smiled. “I’m doing this because I want to,” she said, satisfaction clear on her face. I could tell how much she believed she was no longer just an onlooker. “Right, Asarina?”

“Ssster,” Asarina purred in agreement.

I was speechless, and just then...

“How beautiful.”

I heard a voice. It was as if it echoed from the abyss, sending chills running up my spine.



I was caught totally off guard. I mean, this was our world. No one else was supposed to be here, so the shock of hearing another voice was like a sudden punch to the face.

“Strength born of the purity of your bonds and feelings for one another. I see. I understand how you’ve made it this far.”

It was an unfamiliar young man’s voice, one I shouldn’t have been able to hear in this world.

“Wha—?”

We turned around in a panic, and green eyes looked back at us.

“You’re...?”

A young man with dark brown hair stood down the path Salvia had reconstructed. He hadn’t been there earlier. If he had, we absolutely would’ve noticed. Faced with this unexpected abnormality, I immediately drew the sword at my waist.

“Why is there a human here?!” I bellowed.

Only my servants could enter this world. Well, strictly speaking, there’d been one other exception—Travis, the man who’d turned into a vengeful ghost by using Holy Water.

“What are you?!” I yelled, pointing my sword at him.

Asarina bore her fangs and growled. Salvia hung mist around her so that she could make a move at any time. The young man before us was different from the melting and rotting Travis, but that didn’t mean we could lower our guard. He’d rudely barged into our world, after all. However, the young man completely ignored our behavior.

“You’ve come this far. With no help, at that. This is the second occurrence in such a short time.”

His tone was calm. In contrast to the tension on our side, he was perfectly at ease, which was why something felt off. It felt extremely unpleasant. I grew even warier, but as expected, the young man didn’t care.

“Seriously, it’s truly astonishing.”

He spoke without really addressing us, then for the first time, his expression changed.

“You’re an interesting one.”

He smiled. That said, I obviously didn’t feel any friendship toward him for it.

“What *are* you?” I asked, glaring at him with my sword still at the ready.

“You’ll find out one day,” he said, retracting his smile.

“What—”

“But not yet.”

With that, the young man vanished. I stood stock still in confusion. Nothing made sense. He hadn’t done anything, but the whole encounter left me feeling genuinely uncomfortable.

And then my consciousness started escaping me.

“Time’s up,” Salvia muttered.

I felt the world getting farther away from me. In other words, I was exiting this place—



The moment I woke up, I sprang upright.

“Senpai?”

I heard a voice. I raised my face and saw Katou standing by my bed and looking at me.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You were groaning in your sleep.”

It seemed she’d come to check on me. I looked around, and everyone else was getting out of bed with worried looks.

“What’s wrong, Master?” Lily asked, getting up next to me and putting a hand to my forehead. The cold sensation of her palm against my slightly damp skin felt good. “Did you have a bad dream?”

If only I could say I had.

“Ssster.”

Just then, Asarina came out of my hand and purred. I sighed.

“Salvia?” I said.

“I’m right here.”

Salvia came out of a shroud of mist. Our eyes met, and she nodded. It seemed I hadn’t been dreaming.

“Everyone, I have something to talk about,” I said with another sigh.



I shared everything I knew about what had happened right away. After that, we talked about countermeasures. There’d been an invader inside my world. Travis came to mind, but I couldn’t think of any instance of Holy Water finding its way to me, and I felt fine too. I hadn’t been able to sense someone inside me like I had back then, anyway. I couldn’t say for sure, but this felt more like a momentary point of contact rather than the effect of Holy Water.

“The intervention of someone with an ability that affects the mind... I suppose that would be about right?” Katou said. “But I don’t know if it’s a cheater, a beloved of blessed blood, or a relic of salvation.”

I was in agreement. At the very least, the person I’d met seemed to be a resident of this world. That didn’t necessarily mean he had the same appearance in reality, though. Still, speaking of abilities that affected the mind, someone came to mind right away—the cheater known as Heaven’s Voice, who’d been involved in the attack on Fort

Tilia and had been in contact with Takaya Jun.

“But Heaven’s Voice is supposed to need to touch their target to manifest their ability, right?” Lily said.

“The exploration team thinks so, at least,” I said.

“That’s right,” Iino confirmed. “According to Okazaki.”

“Is he trustworthy?” Lily asked.

Iino nodded as if it were perfectly natural that he would be.

“Okazaki’s ability is to use anyone else’s ability, after all.”

“The Almighty Vessel, huh?” Lily said, sounding like she found this a tad fishy.

I understood how she felt. Okazaki Takuma’s cheat apparently allowed him to use other people’s cheats. That said, I had heard of the inherent abilities of all the exploration team’s nicknamed cheaters like Iino and Shimazu, including those of the Almighty Vessel, so this part was definitely true.

“Okazaki can use other cheaters’ abilities. That includes Heaven’s Voice,” Iino said. “That’s why he knows how it works.”

“So you say, but it’s another matter whether Okazaki Takuma is really telling the truth,” Lily rationally pointed out.

Iino pouted a little, but before she could say anything, I cut in.

“Well, even if we believe him, I have no idea whether I came in contact with Heaven’s Voice during our time in the Colony. Either way, it’s entirely possible.”

And if that had, in fact, been Heaven’s Voice, we could analyze what he’d said to a certain extent.

“Strength born of the purity of your bonds and feelings for one another. I see. I understand how you’ve made it this far.”

We’d finally reached the imperial capital just the other day. It had been a long and thorny path, but it was a step toward reaching my objective of living a quiet life with my servants. Thanks to everyone, I’d overcome many obstacles to “make it this far.” If that was what he meant, I understood.

“You’ve come this far. With no help, at that. This is the second occurrence in such a short time.”

That statement was harder to interpret. If, for example, he meant “without the help of any visitors,” I could understand somewhat. Iino and Shimazu’s help hadn’t been made public, so if Heaven’s Voice wasn’t part of the exploration team, they wouldn’t know. I didn’t understand what he meant by “second occurrence,” but maybe someone else he’d had his eyes on was already in the capital.

“You’re an interesting one.”

And then there were his parting words. From the way Heaven’s Voice had pulled the strings behind the attack on Fort Tilia and the way they’d instigated Takaya Jun into action, I got the impression

they were a criminal who took joy in how people reacted to their crimes. In that sense, they had much in common with this mysterious man. Of course, he could have just said a bunch of random things, though...

In any case, it was best to remain vigilant. After consulting everyone about it, I decided to report this incident to the Holy Order too. Although, it wasn't as if I'd come to any real harm. It'd all happened in my sleep, so I wouldn't be able to say much if they brushed it off as a bad dream. It was fifty-fifty that they were even going to take me seriously. I just hoped it would prompt them to be more cautious. However, the knights reacted in a far more favorable manner than that.

"Please be at ease, sir. We shall handle this immediately."

Not only did Gordon believe me when he came by at my request early in the morning, he swiftly took action.

"We will set up magic tools to block all mental interference. By installing them in your room, they should obstruct any attempts to tamper with your mind from the outside."

"So you've even got stuff like that?"

They lived up to their name as the world's largest religious organization. They were in possession of all sorts of magic tools.

"Once the formalities are done, I'll bring them over in the evening. Furthermore, I'll revise our security protocols."

Gordon had taken charge of the issue for us. In a sense, one could say we were even safer than before. After doing what we could, we finally had some room to relax.



"Well then, shall we have breakfast?" Katou suggested after Gordon left. "They say you can't fight on an empty stomach, and there's no point mulling over it too much."

"Yeah, let's," I agreed.

It was an unpleasant event, but fretting over it wouldn't get us anywhere. It wasn't as if the man had done anything to me, and it was fairly unlikely he would. I already had a track record of defeating Travis when he was armed with a relic of salvation. To harm me in the world of light would require a more poisonous power than the Travis variant of Holy Water. Not even saviors could do that.

In truth, I hadn't felt any kind of threat from the young man. If he was Heaven's Voice, I simply had to keep in mind not to let his words deceive me. Well, it was unpleasant to be prodded like that, but thanks to the Holy Order, we had a countermeasure against it. It was best to restore our spirits for now.

With that in mind, we had breakfast and relaxed. Lobivia was a

little on edge, so I passed the time looking after her. That was when Mikihiro dropped by with Elena's group.

"I'm here, Takahiro. Sounds like something weird happened. You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, no problems here," I answered.

"If you say so. That's good to hear."

Mikihiro started by worrying about me, but once he knew I was okay, he flashed me a carefree smile.

"So, your schedule still open this morning?" he asked.

"Yeah. I knew you were coming, so I left it open."

"Right on. In that case, wanna come with me for a bit?"

"Sure. What for?"

"Remember? Yesterday you said if you had nothing going on you'd exercise by sparring with Lily or Rose or the like, yeah?" he said, grinning. It was like he was inviting me to play on the way to the train station. "How 'bout sparring with me instead?"

Chapter 18: Memories

Mikihiko's suggestion was rather abrupt, but I didn't have a reason to refuse.

"Anyway, why this all of a sudden?" I asked.

"There's no grand reason for it," Mikihiko said, laughing as he waved his hand. "Didn't I tell you I'm here to play?"

"To play?"

"Yup, just to play."

"I see..."

Well, I knew where he was coming from. While I was in Aker, I'd often sparred against knights and soldiers. It'd been a fulfilling and enjoyable experience. I hadn't imagined doing the same with Mikihiko, though. I was a little bewildered, but I could still understand his reasoning.

"Okay. Let's do it," I said.

"Right on. Let's go!"

We talked to my knight bodyguard, then moved to another location. The grand cathedral was a place of worship, but it was also the Holy Order's headquarters. They had spaces dedicated to training, so Mikihiko had secured one of them through Elena.

"You sure it's fine to go along with me on this?" I asked.

"What're you saying? I'm the one who invited you," Mikihiko said, chuckling.

"Yeah, but you know..."

"I should be the one apologizing, Takahiro. Having me as an opponent, I mean." He looked at me with a somewhat suggestive smile. "It's supposed to be time for you to enjoy with your girlfriend."

"Well, you've got a point there." He was teasing me, but I didn't deny it. It was true, after all. "But I finally get to see you again. It'll be fun in its own way. Thankfully, she understands that... I do plan to make up for it, though."

"You're not even acting the least bit shy!"

"I mean, it's totally normal. You have to treat your loved ones dearly."

"And now you're giving me a glimpse of something sweet to deal me major damage?!"

He'd brought it upon himself. Mikihiko reeled back, clutching his chest in an exaggerated manner, then immediately recovered.

“Well, setting that aside, let’s start,” he said.

“Sure.”

Mikihiko had arranged for a training space in the same building we were staying in. The place had been cleared beforehand, so Gerbera and the others could come along too. That meant Mikihiko had discussed it with the Holy Order ahead of time.

Everyone was currently seated in chairs and in spectator mode. My knight and dragon escorts had come along too, so it looked a little like bleachers over there. Fortunately, there’d been far more spectators when I sparred in Aker, so it didn’t bother me much.

I took a wooden training sword and shield. Mikihiko also chose a sword, but in contrast to the one-handed sword I picked up, he took a two-handed one.

“Hm? Don’t you go with two swords?” I asked.

“Yeah, back then I did,” Mikihiko said, rotating his wrist and twirling the sword to check it out. “But that was only ’cause I didn’t have the strength to wield a weapon with some real reach. Now I’m different.”

Now that he mentioned it, that made sense. In other words, he’d become strong enough to wield a two-handed sword. So how strong had he gotten, exactly?

We readied ourselves at an appropriate distance from each other. I stared at Mikihiko head-on as we squared off.

I could sense mana flowing through his body, which was only natural since he said he could fight monsters, but it seemed his ability to reinforce his body through mana was good enough to be practical in combat. I estimated that he was beyond where I’d been when I arrived at Fort Tilia.

“Tch. I tried so hard, but it looks like I haven’t caught up to you when it comes to handling mana.”

Just as Mikihiko said, he wasn’t as good with mana as I was. Well, that was a matter of course. Normally, it took a very long time to learn to manipulate mana. I’d broken through that barrier by nearly dying from a mana deficiency—quite the abnormal experience. After that, I’d worked hard to control it so that I didn’t waste the portion of mana that flowed into me from the girls.

Strictly speaking, that mana was a crystallization of the bonds we’d formed, the times we’d clawed through the mud, and the environment where we’d constantly faced death. It’d be unthinkable for him to catch up to me so easily. That said, this argument only applied to the use of mana. One’s physique played a major role in battle, but that wasn’t the only deciding factor.

“Okay, here I come!” Mikihiko yelled, making his move.

He took a stance and kicked off the ground. He was swift,

matching his improved ability to handle mana. No, he was even faster than I'd expected. Even so, it wasn't beyond my ability. I intercepted him, keeping my guard up all the while.

"Taah!"

After closing the distance, Mikihiko swung hardily straight downward. I blocked with my shield, feeling a significant impact. Regardless, I'd defended without any problems. I was both stronger and faster than him. At the same time, I had another realization: it was a different story when it came to technique.

"Haaah!"

Mikihiko pulled back his sword and struck again in a flash. His strikes were fast. I blocked again, but he paid that no mind and flowed into another attack.

"It's not over yet!"

His slashes left me no room to breathe. From left, right, up, and down, every slash was precise and fast—proof of his solid technique. I continued blocking with my shield and let out a sigh of admiration. It wasn't at Shiran's level, but his swordsmanship was beautiful.

To be frank, he was better than me. Despite being superior to him in terms of physique, a sword fight put us on equal ground. Instead of reinforcement through mana, he'd apparently overtaken me in swordsmanship.

That wasn't all that surprising. Nearly a year had passed since we'd come to this world. Having a mere month of extra combat training didn't give me much of an advantage. The rest was made up for through diligence and talent. That was reality. Honestly speaking, it was a little vexing.

Nevertheless, I felt far more admiration than irritation. Unlike me, Mikihiko definitely had talent. To top it all off, he must have desperately struggled to improve himself. That was the kind of guy he was. He seemed like a joker on the surface, but when it was necessary, he gave it everything he had. These were the fruits of his labor—not that I was going to lose to him in terms of effort.

"Oh come on," Mikihiko groaned. He sounded out of breath, but he yelled in joy. "Takahiro! You're way too tough to crack!"

"That's my specialty."

I mostly blocked with my shield and used my sword if the former wouldn't make it in time. I handled every single swing he took at me. I wasn't a knight or anything of the sort, so I didn't care about losing in terms of swordsmanship. As a result of Gerbera thoroughly beating me black and blue, my singular point of confidence was my ability to defend myself. What's more, I clearly had the superior physique here, so there was no reason for me to allow an attack through.

If this were an actual fight, Lily and the others would run over

while I hardened my defenses, leading to my victory. Even in this situation, the outcome was clear.

“There!” I yelled.

If he were a master at Shiran’s level, it’d be one thing, but his attacks couldn’t not leave gaps between them. I weaved a thrust through his chain of strikes.

“Whoa?!”

Mikihiko reacted on the spur of the moment and just barely blocked my sword. He’d lost his balance doing so, however.

“Ugh! Not yet!”

It was impressive of him to recover from that. The fact that he’d managed to stand his ground was proof of his strength. Nevertheless, this made him lose focus. The gaps between his attacks grew larger, giving me far easier openings to exploit. All that was left was to rinse and repeat. I continued carefully, weaving my way between his slashes.

And then, with a solid thunk, a wooden sword flew into the air.



“You got me...”

Having lost his weapon, Mikihiko raised his hands. He’d hung in there for quite some time, but the scales of victory had tipped in my favor from beginning to end because of the difference in our fighting capabilities.

“Looks like it’s decided,” Mikihiko said, being a good sport. “It’s my loss.”

He sighed. He looked frustrated but also refreshed.

“Man, I really lost. Totally and utterly. I thought I’d gotten stronger, but it was no good.”

“What’re you saying?” I said, relaxing my stance. “You still haven’t used Aerial Knight.”

“Ha ha. If you put it like that, then you didn’t have Asarina fighting with you either.”

He had a point. This had been nothing more than a mock battle. It was meant to improve our technique, so neither of us had done anything to counter that. This was the result from taking that into consideration.

“You sure are strong, Takahiro,” Mikihiko said. He seemed strangely happy about it. “It kinda makes me remember old times.”

“What do you mean?” I asked curiously.

“Come on,” Mikihiko said, smiling. “Back in middle school, we played basketball a lot during lunch, remember?”

His nostalgic reminiscence was like a surprise attack, rendering me silent. Mikihiko hadn’t intended it that way, of course; the

problem was with me. I'd just gotten a real sense for it in my internal world last night; I'd lost a significant portion of my memories from my old world. I didn't give it much thought normally, but when someone talked to me about old times like this, I couldn't help but notice things were missing.

"Well..."

Because I was aware of this, I managed to hide how perturbed I was and deal with it. I shook off the slight chills and searched my memories. Many parts were missing. Majima Takahiro's existence had been especially damaged when I crushed Travis. Still, not everything had been lost yet.

Middle school hadn't been that long ago, and this was an everyday occurrence he was talking about. Normally, such pages in my memories would still be fresh and detailed. Even if the pages faded rapidly, I could still read what was there if I strained my eyes.

"Yeah, we did," I said, remembering after a few seconds. "We all played together at the basketball court next to the south building."

"Yup, that," Mikihiko said, grinning widely. "We went one-on-one every now and then, yeah? This kinda reminds me of that."

Now that he said that, it was somewhat similar.

"How nostalgic," I said.

"We've come a long way since then. Just about everything's changed. But some things haven't."

Mikihiko walked over to his fallen sword. After picking it up, he turned to me once more.

"How 'bout another round?" he said, his smile just like the one from back in those days.

"Sure," I answered with a smile of my own. "We've still got plenty of time."

My own words felt nostalgic to me. Maybe it was because we'd had this exact exchange in the past. We were so far away from those days, and our environment and positions had changed so much. We were doing something completely different too. Nevertheless, it felt the same. This was a valuable experience that showed that not everything had changed since then.



After several more bouts, we parted ways with Mikihiko. I went back to my room with Lily and the others. We had lunch, after which we were going to see the exploration team. While we took a breather before that, Lily brought up the mock battles I'd just had.

"Kaneki really has gotten stronger. It startled me," she said.

"Is that so? He was gifted to begin with," Gerbera replied.

"According to what I saw on our way to Serrata, he looked like he had

the talent for it.”

“Really? Aah, now that you mention it, during the chaos at Fort Tilia, he supported our master pretty well too, huh? Back then, he shouldn’t have had a lick of combat experience.”

“I always figured that so long as he learned to use mana, he would make progress. It isn’t all that surprising if he’s grown even more than that, is it now?”

“Hmm. He has that much talent?”

“Indeed. I remember talking with him about it before. I can’t measure things on a human scale, though, so I don’t know how much talent he actually has,” Gerbera added, cocking her head.

In the not-too-distant future, he was sure to surpass me in this type of contest. It’d be different in a real fight where anything goes, though.

“Takahiro, even though he might surpass you, you sure look happy,” Lobivia said curiously.

“Do I?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I see...” It was a little embarrassing. I scratched my cheek.

“Mikihiko told me something before. He wants to become a knight.”

“My goal is to be a master of everything! I’m aiming to be the commander’s knight.”

Back when we’d just reunited at Fort Tilia, Mikihiko had told me that. Much like me, he’d discovered something dear to him in this world.

“He fell for the commander when she saved him from wandering the Woodlands, so he’s been giving it everything he has to become a knight that can support her. I was just thinking of how those efforts are bearing fruit now. I feel more happy than vexed about it.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Yeah. He’s my friend.”

I brushed Lobivia’s head, then stood up. We’d started the morning off depressingly, but now I felt refreshed. That wasn’t only because I’d gotten some exercise; I had Mikihiko to thank for it.

“Now then, it’s about time to go see the exploration team.”

Chapter 19: Contact with the Exploration Team

Our meeting with the exploration team was, at most, to give our greetings, so the people of Aker weren't participating. The dragons of Draconia were a different matter. They were here as my guards, and Katou had suggested we select mostly men from their group to avoid giving the exploration team a bad impression on our first meeting.

Arriving at the designated room a little early, I chatted with the others while ruminating about the exploration team. Honestly speaking, I had mixed feelings about them. By leaving as the first expeditionary force, they'd lost control of the visitors who'd been left behind. There was no mistaking that they'd been the trigger leading to the Colony's destruction.

However, I knew that they'd had no ill intent. The exploration team's members were generally driven by virtuous intentions, and even now, that hadn't changed. Not having experienced the Colony's destruction, their values remained the same as from their time in our old world. They followed a respectable moral compass and saved people from the threat of monsters.

Naturally, that wasn't necessarily the case when they were driven into a corner. The fake savior uproar in the southern Empire and Juumonji's attack on Fort Tilia proved this. Still, when the exploration team was moving as a single entity, there was no real need to worry about that.

The same had applied when they left on their journey from the Colony. Even though they were outrageously strong, there had been no guarantee the expedition would be safe. For example, they could have encountered a situation where their powers didn't help. Nevertheless, they'd challenged the Woodlands for the sake of contacting the people of this world. Behind their actions was definitely a desire to save the powerless students who'd been left waiting in the Colony.

The majority of the members who'd participated in the first expeditionary force were optimistic. Even if they hadn't recognized the danger of their actions, they had made their choice with good intentions. Plus, their choice had a certain logic behind it. If they'd done nothing, there would've been no future for the Colony. They'd only have been prolonging the inevitable.

That said, it would've been totally unrealistic to take around seven hundred hindrances through a forest packed with dangerous monsters. That was why, out of around three hundred exploration team members, only one hundred elites had gone into unknown lands while the rest, including two of the upper brass, had stayed behind to protect the Colony. That had been the appropriate decision at the time.

Seeing that the Colony had fallen, one could say that their outlook had been too naive. But what should they have done instead? It would be unfair to criticize them when I didn't have an answer to that.

Such was my belief now, but that was only possible through calm analysis. When the Colony had collapsed, as one of the people who'd gone through a hell I wanted to forget, I was unable to accept it on an emotional level. Because of that, my wariness toward the exploration team always took the fore. It was just as I had told Shiran not too long ago.

Shimazu's offer for me to join the exploration team required me to set aside these emotions and make a proper decision. I believed my meeting with Nakajima Kojiro today was a good opportunity to figure that out...which was why I was a little bewildered.

"Oh? Are you Majima Takahiro?"

Having finished with their business, the exploration team entered the room. There were four of them. A tall boy stood at the front, facing me with a carefree smile. His features were so handsome that they seemed perfect for television.

"I'm the exploration team's leader, Nakajima Kojiro. I'm pleased to meet you."

He spoke with an air of excitement that didn't seem entirely diplomatic and held out his hand for a handshake.



“I’m Majima Takahiro,” I said, standing up from my seat. “Thank you for everything you’ve done regarding this matter with the margrave.”

“You don’t need to thank me. It did it because I wanted to,” he said, laughing and slapping my shoulder.

I’d heard about him from Iino already. He really did have a sociable personality. He led the strongest martial force in this world and had always been extended every courtesy as a hero on his journey, but he didn’t act self-important in any way whatsoever.

And yet, he had a peculiar presence about him that prevented people from treating him lightly. It wasn’t just a superficial thing like his handsome features or balanced build; something within him oozed out, making his presence more prominent. In all likelihood, this had nothing to do with the tremendous power he’d gained by coming to this world. It was simply his disposition by nature.

In addition, he was top class among all visitors in battle, he had the leadership skills to have gathered everyone in the early days of our arrival in this world, and he was good at making decisive judgments. Such was the exploration team’s leader. It made sense that he led an entire group of cheaters.

It was precisely because of who he was that I found his attitude toward me somewhat baffling. Sitting next to me, Lily seemed to think the same thing, because she whispered in my ear quietly.

“He seems super friendly...or like, really, really happy?”

That was it. The leader of the exploration team was facing me with genuine favor that far exceeded simple courtesy. His attitude was the same toward my servants too.

“And you’re Majima’s servants, right? I heard about all of you from Iino.” After taking a seat, Nakajima looked at the others one by one, addressing them with a carefree smile before turning back to me. “It must’ve been tough until now. I’m sure many in this world look at you with prejudice because you have monsters as friends.”

His words contained consideration and heartfelt sympathy. It was enough to bewilder me a little. Iino had said that Nakajima had shown an interest in us when she rejoined the exploration team. I hadn’t known the extent of his interest, though.

Strangely enough, it was as if he were meeting his favorite artist or athlete or something. He had been treated as a hero in this world, so it felt kind of backward for him to act like this. However, our side was apparently alone in feeling that way. Nakajima leaned forward quite a bit as he continued.

“I’ve always wanted to meet you. I’d love to hear all about your jour—”

“Um, Leader? Please calm down. Majima is shocked,” a cool voice cut in. “I understand you’re glad to meet him, but please control yourself.”

It was a girl who gave off the impression of an intellectual.

“But Moeko...” Nakajima protested.

“You’re the exploration team’s leader. You need to keep your composure,” she said, snappily stopping his objections before turning to me. “Nice to meet you. I’m Kuriyama Moeko.”

She didn’t even smile. Her expression was less than civil, but it wasn’t as if she had any reservations about us. She just greeted us plainly. Her lack of courtesy could be because that was the kind of person she was.

“Aah. So you’re... I’ve heard of you,” I said. “Nice to meet you, Kuriyama. You’re the exploration team leader’s assistant, right?”

“It’s nothing that impressive,” she said.

Despite her own claims, she was clearly talented. In truth, I’d been told that she and Nakajima had pretty much conducted all the negotiations with the exploration team. She seemed difficult to approach, but that was mitigated by Nakajima, which kept the exploration team running smoothly. Regardless, Kuriyama remained humble.

“I just handle the busywork,” she said. “I don’t have a nickname or anything, but everyone here aside from me does. There are several others who’ve yet to arrive, but I believe they’ll be here shortly.”

Currently, seven nicknamed cheaters were in the exploration team:

The Sword of Light Nakajima Kojirou.

The Multiplex Kubota Yousuke.

The Fairy Ring Shimazu Yui.

The Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma.

The Skanda Iino Yuna.

The Indomitable Will Ishida Tetsuo.

The Stalwart Snow White Mitarai Aoi.

Furthermore, there were four nicknamed cheaters whose whereabouts were unknown:

The Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya.

The Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji.

The Sturm und Drang Yuzukisono Rui.

The Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya.

As a member of the exploration team, Kuriyama was a cheater, but she had no nickname. If I had to say, she was more like me. She could create weapons using shadow magic with her inherent ability, but she wasn’t very capable in a fight. She’d participated in the first expeditionary force because her abilities as an assistant had been

highly valued.

Receiving a nickname required possessing combat strength that could influence the fate of the world. Of those who were afforded such a title, Nakajima, Kubota, Shimazu, Iino, and Ishida were in this room. It was a little unexpected that Mitarai hadn't come, but we were here to greet the members of the exploration team, so she didn't have to be here. Rather, it was more curious that Okazaki wasn't here when he was supposed to be, but I'd been told there were issues with his personality and it happened pretty often. The exploration team members didn't seem to pay that any mind, so I moved on to greeting the remaining two I hadn't met yet.

"I'm Kubota. Nice to meetcha."

"Ishida Tetsuo."

Kubota casually raised his hand, whereas Ishida bowed his head with a curt greeting. They weren't as friendly as Nakajima, but they didn't seem to think badly of me or my servants either. Perhaps Shimazu had spoken to them beforehand.

"Anyway, sorry 'bout this," Kubota said after our greetings were over. "I'm sure our leader acting all giddy is a bit of a shock. Just let it pass." He chuckled cheerfully. "He's been dying to meet you for a while now."

"That badly?" I asked.

Kuriyama had mentioned the same thing earlier. I turned to look at Nakajima, and he returned a charming smile.

"Of course. I'm something of a fan of yours, after all," he said.

"M-My fan...?"

"Ha ha. There's no need to be surprised. You've just accomplished so much." His shoulders shook with laughter. Going as far as saying he was my fan was probably a joke, but his favor for me was real. "Just as I said before, having monsters as servants must've made it hard to survive in this world. I'm sure you've searched for trustworthy allies through all the adversity, created a place for yourself, and continued your journey while warding away all the troubles that have come upon you. And now, you're the hero of Aker. It really is impressive."

"That's all happenstance... I merely protected what was dear to me. It just ended up that way. The real heroes are people like you and the others of the exploration team." I wasn't flattering him or anything; that was my true opinion. "I've heard the exploration team has been handling monsters all across the country. You go out of your way to save people in need you've never met. I'm sure you've helped far more people than I have."

"I won't deny that," Nakajima said, nodding, "but I haven't overcome any adversity. Unlike you, that is. Adversity, crises, trials,

and hardships. Every time trouble blocks your path, you have the determination to overcome it. I think highly of you for that.” He smiled as if he was enjoying the conversation and spread out his arms. “I’ll put it simply. I love people like you who give it their all.”

It didn’t seem he was lying. The exploration team’s nicknamed cheaters all smiled wryly as if this was a common occurrence. Still, they all faced their leader with favorable attitudes.

“You’re making it stuffy in here, Leader,” Kubota teased, and everyone laughed. This was likely normal for them.

“Well, sorry,” Nakajima said with an amused smile of his own. He shrugged, then turned to me once more. “Anyway, that’s why I’m on your side, Majima. I hope we can continue to work together even after this issue with the margrave is over.”

“I’m...glad to hear that. It’s really reassuring,” I said, thinking I had to say something.

This was going better than expected. At this rate, it seemed I could maintain a friendly connection to the exploration team. Due to this, the conversation naturally flowed to the next topic.

“Oh yeah, there were talks of Majima joining us, right?” Kubota said. “Shimazu’s been real gung ho in getting things moving. She even went around getting signatures.”

“That I have,” Shimazu said, nodding.

“How’s that going?” Kubota asked.

“Currently, around sixty percent are in agreement. At this rate, I think it’ll soon be seventy or eighty percent.”

“Hmm, not bad at all. You’ve put in some work.”

“It hasn’t only been me... Rather, I’ve accomplished very little. When I left the capital to get Majima, it was only thirty percent.”

“Hmm. I guess some guys changed their minds after seeing a buncha names already. So does that make Majima one of us now?”

“No, that’s still to be determined,” Shimazu said. “It’s up to Majima.”

“That so?” Kubota asked, looking a little surprised. “Why not just join us?”

“Majima has his life in Aker to consider,” Kuriyama interjected.

“Well, it’s not like he has to join us,” Nakajima said, nodding along. “There have been others who have left us as well. I intend to respect everyone’s will.”

“Well, that’s the kinda guy you are,” Kubota said.

“I will, of course, welcome you if you join,” Nakajima added, turning to me again. “So, how about it?” His eyes were full of hope. He was sure to respect my will, but setting that aside, he wanted me to join.

All eyes turned to me, waiting for an answer. I’d met with the

exploration team and gotten a feel for how they saw me. I had more than enough information to make a decision.

“I...”

After mulling it over for a few seconds, I started to answer—but right before I could say anything, the door to the room opened with a thud. Everyone turned to look.

“Hang on right there.”

With a stern expression, the Stalwart Snow White Mitarai Aoi returned all our gazes.

Chapter 20: A Gulf Carved

Mitarai maintained her grim expression as she stepped into the room.

“Aoi...?”

A quiet, trembling voice shook the air. It was Katou. She was a smart girl, so maybe she’d predicted what was about to happen next. Even without such wisdom, it was obvious to everyone that the mood in here was turbulent. The thorny aura the nicknamed cheater, the Stalwart Snow White, emitted put Lily and the others on guard. Not that Mitarai launched herself at us; she just sounded stiff.

“About Majima-senpai joining us. I’m against it.”

“What? Aoi, wh—”

“Be quiet, Yuna-senpai.”

Iino started to say something in a panic, but Mitarai cut her off. Her strong tone shocked Iino, so Nakajima continued the conversation in her stead.

“What’s the meaning of this?”

Even when faced with a nicknamed cheater’s threatening aura, he remained composed. As the exploration team’s leader, he was probably used to this kind of situation. Or maybe he simply had the composure of one who held tremendous power.

“You can speak your mind, but you’ll have to give me a reason for this.”

“A reason? It’s simple. I question Majima-senpai’s morality,” Mitarai said.

“In short, you say he’s unsuitable for the exploration team?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask why you think so?”

Mitarai turned to me. There was a hostility in her eyes that she’d never shown before. She then focused on something behind me.

“Majima-senpai, you’re in a relationship with that knight lady, right? And with the person there who looks like Miho-senpai. The same goes for the spider lady and the maid, right?”

She pointed them out one by one with her eyes, diving into the topic we’d been trying to avoid to the point that we’d carefully selected who would come with us from Draconia. She’d brought everything to light. If not for the way she was demanding answers, I’d almost be impressed.

“Do you deny it?” Mitarai asked provocatively.

Seeing how convinced she was, I knew she wasn’t going to back down. If I tried to lie, it would likely give everyone here a worse impression of me.

“No, it’s the truth,” I answered.

In that instant, everyone looked at me differently. I ignored that for now and focused on the girl before me.

“I’m surprised you noticed,” I said.

“I could kinda tell based on your gazes and expressions and how close you all were,” Mitarai said, scoffing. “Looks like you were trying to hide it in public, but I was monitoring you.”

“You were?”

“The reason I asked Yui-senpai to bring me along was so that I could find out what kinda person you were.”

Now that I thought of it, when I first met her, she’d been watching me and Shiran getting intimate. That hadn’t been because she was curious, but because she’d had an objective in mind. Even if she hadn’t come to a decisive conclusion then, she’d accompanied us all the way here. There had been plenty of signs for her to question our relationships, and they were what brought her here to criticize me.

Now that this had happened, the problem was how the exploration team would react.

The first to speak was Kuriyama. “But aren’t they monsters? Strictly speaking, they aren’t women.”

She was apparently trying to support me. Perhaps as someone responsible for an organization, she merely disliked quarrels.

“Besides, isn’t it allowed in this world?” she added.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Mitarai retorted stubbornly. “This world is this world. We’re not from here.”

No. Rather than being stubborn, it was more like she thought she was stating the obvious. To her—to all exploration team members with good sense—her way of thinking was perfectly reasonable. Kuriyama’s argument had, in reality, made her more obstinate.

“Well, you make a good point,” Kubota said in agreement. “I get where Mitarai’s coming from. Even if it’s accepted here, getting it on with a whole buncha girls at once is grounds to doubt his morals.”

He wasn’t being as hostile as Mitarai, but he still made a somewhat sour expression.

“I can’t agree with the thought that they’re not girls, though,” he added. “Until meeting them myself, I thought all monsters were the same, but even if they all look different, it seems Majima’s servants are no different from people.”

“That’s basically it,” Mitarai said, nodding in agreement. “I can’t work with someone so faithless. Even everyone who agreed already

should think the same... In fact, the whole sixty percent Yui-senpai gathered is suspicious too.”

“Huh?” Shimazu cried. “Wh-What do you mean?”

For a while now, Shimazu had been mulling over how to mediate in this unexpected development. She couldn’t keep quiet after that statement, though.

“I actually have sixty percent of the signatures...” she said, leaning forward.

“I talked with a girl who gave her signature. I thought it was weird.”

“W-Weird how...?”

“As far as I know, she was totally against it.”

Mitarai had evidently been talking to the other members about this, which was probably why she hadn’t shown up at first.

“That girl thought it’d be scary for Majima-senpai to join us. I’m not saying you’re lying, Yui-senpai, but it got me thinking, so I went to check. I asked her why she agreed. She told me that she decided to sign after hearing a certain story.”

“A certain story...?” Shimazu repeated.

“The slime with Majima-senpai can revive the dead,” Mitarai said, shifting her gaze to Lily.

“Huh? Me?” Lily said, her eyes wide as saucers. She hadn’t expected the conversation would turn to her. “I can do what now?”

“You’ve got Miho-senpai’s looks, right? That’s not all. I’ve heard the supposedly dead Miho-senpai is literally inside you. In other words, you revived the dead, right?”

“That’s not exactly...”

In a sense, Mitarai was right. Mizushima had died, but she was still here. Normally, even a cheater couldn’t revive the dead. We’d discovered that in the Colony. No matter how much power one possessed, some things were still impossible. Maybe that was why this sounded all the more attractive.

“Back in the Colony, several exploration team members died. The same goes with that fake savior stuff. Obviously, everyone’s super worried about it.”

Mitarai made it sound very personal. Just maybe, she’d experienced it for herself.

“We might die. Our friends might die. I’m pretty sure we’re all anxious about it,” Mitarai continued. “But what if we have Majima-senpai’s cooperation? That girl signed ’cause she hopes this is true. Of course, Lily has already assimilated Miho-senpai, so it’d actually be her kids or something who do it.”

“H-Hey, Mitarai, that’s going a little too far...” Kubota cut in, glancing at Lily.

Lily's expression was exceedingly grim. I couldn't help but be extremely displeased too. Specifically, they wanted to use our children as tools to revive the dead. Naturally, it wasn't that the people who shared those opinions truly thought of it that way. They weren't full of malice or anything. The majority of the exploration team only knew of monsters as monsters. They didn't know what my servants were. Kubota himself had just said, *"Until meeting them myself, I thought all monsters were the same."*

Monsters were beings with no will and no personality who simply bared their fangs at humanity. They saw me as a cheater who could manipulate them as tools, which was how they'd come up with this idea.

I understood this, but it was a different matter whether I accepted it. Regardless of whether there was any ill intent, it was unpleasant. Even Mitarai was put off by this and winced a little.

"Ah, no, I'm not the one saying stuff like that," she said. "That's just how it turned out. Looks like it's mostly Okazaki-senpai spreading it around."

"Him again? I can easily imagine him acting all proud of that suggestion," Kubota said, sighing.

Shimazu's list of signatures included the Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma, so it wasn't odd for his name to come up now. On the other hand, the one who'd started that list was now pale as a sheet.

"Wh-What's with that? I haven't heard anything about it..." Shimazu said, turning my way. "Please wait, Majima. I really didn't mean to..."

"I know. You had good intentions," I said.

It was unfortunate. She'd done all this because she believed it was best for the both of us and had taken great pains to get this far. Unfortunately, it'd been twisted along the way. In all likelihood, it'd happened while Shimazu was away from the capital. She'd also said that she'd gotten more signatures than she thought she'd get. The reason for that was now clear.

Shimazu had taken her eyes off gathering signatures to leave the capital and pick me up, so there was no point blaming her for it. However, looking at the simple facts, that was all the list represented now. That was what Mitarai was protesting.

"Aoi, is this what you're trying to say?" Having stayed quiet this whole time, the Indomitable Will Ishida Tetsuo now spoke. "People are only swept up by the possibility of reviving the dead. They don't actually agree with him joining in the original sense. Also, you don't believe in Majima-senpai's faithfulness."

I'd heard Mitarai and Ishida were childhood friends. He was used to summing up what she was trying to say. The truth we'd been trying

to keep from the exploration team had all been exposed. As a result, Mitarai and Kubota now distrusted me. At this rate, Ishida would also share his childhood friend's opinion.

Nakajima and Kuriyama's expressions hadn't changed much, but about half of the members here were reacting negatively. Even so, I understood. Rather, I resisted the idea myself. It was only natural for them to have a poor impression of me.

It was vexing that they thought of me as some frivolous playboy, but we didn't know one another, so we couldn't make them understand. That was to say nothing of how the exploration team's members had maintained their values from our old world. Having such a strong sense of justice also made them fastidious. It'd be one thing if we got to know everyone, but it was extremely bad for this to get out on our first meeting.

I'd predicted this, so I'd already made my decision. If something like this were to happen, I had no choice but to give up on it. Thus, I easily accepted the situation. *I* did, at least. Someone else here didn't.

"P-Please wait a moment!" Katou stood up in a panic, sending her chair clattering behind her.

"Katou...?"

I hadn't expected this. I was wondering if she had some kind of plan, but it didn't look that way.

"You've got it wrong! You're misunderstanding, Aoi!" Dismay was written all over Katou's face. "Majima-senpai isn't that sort of person!"

She stared at Mitarai and spoke in a strong tone. Alarm, anger, and bewilderment colored her voice. However, there was none of her specialty logic behind it. She was just saying exactly what came to mind.

Something was strange. This wasn't like her. Normally, she would never act like this. Be that as it may, thinking back on it, maybe this was how she was before Mitarai. The girl known as Katou Mana had been shattered into pieces in this world once already. The cool and collected girl I knew had come together after that fact.

Maybe by reuniting with a friend from before that time, something that Katou had once lost inside her was coming back. She was returning to being a girl who'd lived a peaceful life before being horribly scarred. Her coolheaded self was nowhere in sight.

To my eyes, such a change was a good thing. Above all else, Katou had seemed happy. I'd hoped Mitarai could be for her what Mikihiko was for me, but unfortunately, things didn't work out that way.

"Mana! Why won't you understand?!"

"You're the one who doesn't understand!"

An emotional opinion was refuted by an emotional outburst. That was all there was to it. Spurred entirely by feelings, they only grew

more fervent. Katou was already bad at dealing with sudden events, but having lost her normal calculating nature, and with her friend, of all people, making things worse, Katou was panicking.

“You still don’t get it?!” Mitarai said, her cheeks turning red.

She’d long lost her composure. She ran over to Katou and grabbed her shoulders. Perhaps failing to hold back her strength a little, her grip made Katou wince.

“Open your eyes, Mana!”

Her expression showed nothing but concern for her friend—no falsehood. Maybe that was precisely why all this had happened.

“He’s scum who’s laid his hands on all sorts of girls!”

Mitarai kept her eyes fixed on Katou, screaming as she pointed at me. Then, the decisive blow came.

“Falling for a guy like that will only make you unhappy!”

This was the reason Mitarai had made things worse. She’d acted this way for her friend’s sake.

“Ah...”

Katou froze as if time had stopped. Her cheeks turned redder and redder, then she turned pale. She’d regained her composure from the sudden shock as if a bucket of cold water had been dropped on her, and she finally understood. She now knew why Mitarai was doing this and why she’d aggravated the situation. Katou also knew what she had to do now.

The Katou Mana I knew wouldn’t hesitate once she came to that realization. In the next instant, all expression vanished from her face.

“What kind of assumptions are you making?” she said in a terrifyingly cold voice. She looked at Mitarai with a chilling glare. That was the look she gave her enemies.

“M-Mana...?”

It was probably the first time Katou had treated her so coldly. Faced with that sudden change, Mitarai sounded bewildered, but Katou no longer gave that any more thought.

“Majima-senpai isn’t the type of person you say he is. I’ve been with him this whole time, but he hasn’t laid a single finger on me.”

Mitarai’s grip on Katou’s shoulders loosened, and not missing that opportunity, Katou shook her off. Taking several steps back, she glared at the girl who’d once been her friend.

“He’s protected me faithfully until now. It’s distasteful for you to slander my benefactor like that.”

“Mana...”

Mitarai was now on the receiving end of criticism. Unable to keep up with this change, she was in a fluster.

“B-But Mana, you’re in lo—”

“That’s a misunderstanding,” Katou said coldly, then took a

breath.

She glanced my way, and for a second, I thought I saw her lips quiver as if she was about to cry. Maybe that was just my imagination, though. The next moment, Katou spoke as if it were nothing.

“I don’t like Majima-senpai or anything,” she declared with no warmth in her voice. Seeing her as she was now, nobody could doubt her. “Your misunderstanding is causing trouble.”

Mitarai stood stock still in silence. All feelings of criticism toward me had vanished at this point, which was Katou’s intent. People’s impressions changed so easily. Katou had turned Mitarai’s misunderstanding into an utter nuisance to her. However, as the price for that, a decisive gulf had been carved between the two girls.

Silence hung over the room. A hopeless, heavy atmosphere sucked all the air out. And just then, the door was flung open once more with a loud thud.

Chapter 21: Sworn Enemy

“I’m a little late. Guess I kept you waiting?”

A boy entered the room, acting self-important as he walked in. I knew right away that it was Okazaki Takuma. We’d been in the same grade back in school, so I recognized his face. He’d finally arrived. After taking a look around the room, he raised an eyebrow.

“Did something happen?” he asked.

Sensing the awkward atmosphere, he spoke as if he wasn’t bothered by it at all. Well, that was just the kind of guy he was, but his inability to read the room was convenient in this instance. It created a chance to start back from square one after Mitarai’s criticism of me and the weird atmosphere that had come afterward.

I came to that conclusion logically, but such hopes were unexpectedly dashed.

“You’re...” Ella, who’d been standing by the wall as my guard, muttered quietly. She looked as if she was seeing something unbelievable. The next second, a negative, heartrending gleam filled both her eyes.

“You bastard!”

She screamed, hatred practically flying out of her mouth. It wasn’t just Ella either. All the dragons of Draconia were postured for battle, bloodlust in all their eyes.

“Ella?!”

This was really bad—totally different from Katou and Mitarai’s quarrel. If it turned into a physical confrontation, everything would be a total mess. I didn’t know why they’d lost their cool the moment they saw Okazaki, but we couldn’t let this turn into a fight.

Still, what was I to do? Was it best to order Gerbera, Lily, and Shiran to stop them? No. The dragons outnumbered us, and they were significantly strong. We wouldn’t make it in time like that.

As I continued to fret over what to do, a sudden chill ran down my spine. A colossal amount of mana had filled the room.

“Wha...?!”

It felt as if the mana’s mere presence could bring me to my knees. In the next instant, a flash of white seared my vision, and the blinding brilliance cut in between the lunging dragons and Okazaki.

“Th-That’s...”

The white glow turned out to be a beautiful sword made of

hardened light, its blade long enough to traverse the entire room. However, in contrast to its beauty, I could feel terrifying power radiating from it. If any normal person were to touch it with merely a finger, they were liable to lose an entire arm. Even the dragons who'd lost themselves in anger were now frozen in place. The sword simply possessed that much power.

"That's enough," Nakajima said.

He remained seated as he held out the shining blade. He hadn't been holding anything of the like moments ago. In other words, he'd created that thing in the bat of an eye. It wasn't as if he were holding the blade at my throat or anything, but I gulped. It was the Sword of Light, the strongest ability in the exploration team. The dragons of Draconia stood stock still, their willpower dampened by the sight.

"E-Eeek!"

As for the other concerned party, Okazaki's knees buckled, and he sank to the floor. It was quite unbecoming of him, but it was as if he'd casually entered a room to be suddenly greeted by a gun...or rather, an artillery cannon or missile. I couldn't exactly fault him for it. The pressure we all felt was enough to make us imagine death.

Everyone in the room was frozen, which was exactly why I had to take the initiative. This was my only chance to get things under control. The moment I sensed that, I opened my mouth.

"Ella. Mind explaining what's going on?"

I pushed back the pressure crushing down on me, spurred by my sense of duty to do something about the standoff.

Seeing me like this, Nakajima sighed quietly in admiration, and a smile crossed his handsome face. It was as if he truly found this enjoyable. The sword vanished from his hand; he'd decided it was no longer necessary. With that, everyone in the room was finally released from the pressure, including Ella.

"Lord Takahiro..."

She came back to her senses and realized what was happening. Her usually composed expression was now extremely shaken.

"Ah, um... Forgive me, Lord Takahiro," she said. "Despite accepting the duty of being your guard..."

"Relax," I said. "I know you didn't do that for no reason. What happened?"

Ella's expression once more filled with hatred. Even after regaining her composure, the emotions inside her remained unchanged. She glared at Okazaki as he staggered back to his feet.

"He's one of the humans who killed our family," she said.

Startled by this, everyone turned to look at Okazaki.

"Wh-What?! The hell are you spouting?!" Okazaki protested, looking awfully surprised himself.

It looked like he had no idea what she meant, but I had grasped the situation now.

“Okazaki,” I said.

“Wh-What? I mean, who the hell are you?” Okazaki said, turning my way.

“I’m Majima Takahiro. We were supposed to meet today, remember?”

“Oh, you... I mean, is that so?” Having finally regained his composure, his tone quickly changed. That didn’t matter to me, though. I paid it no mind and continued.

“I have a question. Does a dragon subjugation bring anything to mind?”

“Why do you know about that...?” Okazaki questioned, looking a little surprised. It was just as I thought. He withdrew his astonished look, then shrugged exaggeratedly. “Whatever. I don’t know what’s going on, but if you know, you know. That’s right. I helped out with subjugating some dragons at the Dragon Jinguuji’s request. They were pretty strong, and we lost some guys too. Well, if not for my power, it would’ve been pretty dangerous.”

He even blabbered on about things I hadn’t asked about. The reason he seemed so proud of it was that he believed it was an accomplishment worthy of praise.

“When did you...?” Kuriyama uttered.

It appeared even the exploration team hadn’t been aware of his actions. I hadn’t expected one of Draconia’s assailants to be among the people I met in the capital either, but now that I thought of it, Okazaki’s ability was to use other people’s abilities. By combining Shimazu’s and Iino’s cheats, it was entirely possible for him to make the trip back so quickly. I heard the exploration team often spent a few days in the towns they went through, so he’d had plenty of time to do so.

It wasn’t unusual for an exploration team member to take part in subjugating monsters, but in this case, they’d picked the wrong fight.

“So? What’s that got to do with this?” Okazaki asked.

The dragons were once more seething in rage as they watched him shrug. Grateful that they kept themselves from attacking him, I spoke in their stead.

“The settlement you destroyed was their home.”

“Huh?” Okazaki looked like he had no idea what I was saying.

“I’m telling you that they’re dragons.”

“What...?”

Even after I spelled it out for him, he still hadn’t caught on. Ella’s group looked no different from humans right now, and they hadn’t been introduced to Okazaki because of his tardiness, so he’d never

considered that they were dragons.

Seeing her sworn enemy playing dumb, Ella trembled in anger as she carefully chose her words.

“Visitors attacked our settlement. We were the dragons who were there at the time. I watched with my own eyes as you used magic to crush Rex’s...my little brother’s head.”

Even as she spoke, her emotions ran wild. Then Ella’s figure started to transform. Scales covered her face, and her pupils turned into vertical slits. Her fangs creaked as they grew out, her hands turned to claws, and a tail stretched out behind her.

Being the target of her glare, Okazaki shuddered. “Th-That can’t... No way... Really...?”

There was no way he could continue being ignorant now. He looked at all the dragons, his expression torn, then shook his head.

“I-I didn’t know...”

The first words to come out of his mouth were a refusal to accept what had happened.

“What the hell?! How was I supposed to know that?! Humans that turn into dragons?! You should’ve said so from the start!”

“You’re the ones who attacked without any questions!” Ella screamed. “After magic blew up our settlement, one of my surviving brothers tried to talk to you, and he was murdered while still in human form! He wasn’t able to communicate with you to begin with!”

I’d heard the details and the outcome of the attack on Draconia already. A group of visitors had broken through the Mist Barrier that only dragons could navigate, presumably because of the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya’s ability to transform. The visitors had infiltrated the settlement in a small group completely undetected, and after undoing the Mist Barrier, they’d launched a surprise attack with magic.

Thrown into chaos by the sudden attack, the dragons had engaged the assailants. However, the visitors had received reinforcements as the fight dragged on, and all hopes of victory had been lost. Rex had been slaughtered, and the others would have all been massacred if not for Malvina’s arrival. By sacrificing herself to stall them, she’d barely managed to let the surviving dragons escape.

As Ella said, they hadn’t been able to communicate with the visitors, meaning no translation runestones had been active during the attack. It had likely been decided that it wasn’t necessary when the attack was being carried out entirely by visitors. What’s more, the first assailants had probably concluded that the human trying to talk to them was a monster pretending to be a human. Monsters like doppelgangers existed, so it would be natural for them to believe that.

Even so, the fact that there was a settlement at all should’ve prompted them to suspect that the dragons weren’t just monsters.

Maybe they hadn't seen it as such because they'd blown everything up with magic right off the bat. Sadly, it didn't seem like I'd be able to hear those details.

"I didn't know! I didn't know any of that!" Okazaki shrieked.

"Okazaki..." I said.

"Shut up!"

I tried talking to him, but he was unapproachable. Still, the way he screamed about not knowing seemed to be the truth, so he likely hadn't been part of the initial wave. He'd joined after the residents of Draconia had turned into dragons and the battle had already begun for real. In that case, there was no way for him to know about what had happened before that and no point in asking him about it either. Rather, there was no use in talking to him at all.

"I didn't know! I didn't know! It's not my fault!"

In truth, it was clear that Okazaki had been under the impression that he'd done a good thing, which was why he was in such a panic once the situation turned upside down on him. He couldn't look reality in the eyes. All the same, his attitude slighted the victims' feelings far too much.

"You bastard..."

As such, I couldn't fault Ella for her anger.

"Ella."

Lobivia called out to her older sister. Lobivia had a tendency to be impulsive, but unexpectedly, she hadn't shown any signs whatsoever of preparing to attack Okazaki this whole time. On the contrary, she was trying to get everything under control.

"Leave it at that," Lobivia said, keeping her voice low.

"But Patricia..."

"There's no point blaming him. He's not worth it. More importantly, if you fight here, it'll be a bother for Takahiro. You can't do that."

Lobivia wasn't fine with this or anything. She glared at Okazaki with a look that could kill and bit hard on her lip. Her reaction was understandable. The young girl had lost her mother. There'd been a rift between them, but the opportunity to reconcile that they'd both hoped for would never come now. Lobivia was enduring it, so nobody else could say anything about it.

A grave mood engulfed the room. That was more than enough.

"Nakajima. Unfortunately, I'll be excusing myself here," I said.

Nakajima nodded. "Right. Seems that's for the best."

"About joining you, let's just forget the whole thing," I added.

"That...is sadly the only option at this point," Nakajima agreed, looking awfully regretful.

He hadn't done anything wrong. One of his members had done

something of his own accord completely separate from the group. I didn't even think of asking the exploration team to take responsibility for it. However, it was out of the question to join them now.

"Sorry about that," I said. "You even went as far as supporting me to join you."

"If that is your will, I'll respect it," he said, unoffended by my answer. "I'm sure you have many opinions about us, but I think of myself as your ally, Majima."

In other words, Nakajima had no intention of changing his view of me, even after Mitarai's criticisms. From my point of view, even if I couldn't join the exploration team because Okazaki was with them, it didn't mean I was hostile toward the team as a whole just because of him either. I was grateful for Nakajima's calm behavior.

"Let me know if you're ever in trouble," Nakajima said.

"Thank you."

With that, my first meeting with the exploration team came to an end.

Chapter 22: My Feelings for Her

I sank into the sofa in the living room of the space that'd been prepared for us.

"She sleeping?" I muttered, lowering my gaze.

Lobivia was curled up in my lap, breathing quietly. I placed my finger to her lips, and she nibbled around my finger's second joint. Sitting on my opposite side, Lily peeked down at her.

"A lot did happen today," she said.

"Yeah."

Lobivia looked younger than she actually was. It was possible the stress was making her act more like a child. Thinking back on today's meeting with the exploration team, I'd never even imagined they'd be carrying that kind of bomb with them. It'd been a pretty dangerous situation.

We were currently in a very delicate position. Having discord between us and the highly influential exploration team wouldn't do us any favors. We were lucky that this hadn't developed into a definitive fissure between us. Nakajima's unexpectedly favorable reception and Lobivia's levelheaded dispersal of the tension had saved us.

I brushed her red hair, and Lobivia's expression softened a little. That was about the time Rose opened the door from the adjacent room.

"Master. Um, may I have a moment?"

"What's up?" I asked, finding her hesitant tone somewhat odd.

Rose took a moment to ready herself, then cut to the chase.

"Um, it's about Mana. She seems to be feeling very down."

"Aah... The whole thing with Mitarai?" I asked.

That was, of course, the first thing that came to mind. Mitarai had done all that for Katou's sake. Katou hadn't done anything, so she wasn't responsible for any of it, but it probably bothered her seeing that she'd been the cause for it.

"Yes, there's that too," Rose said, nodding. She seemed to be holding something in. "That obviously isn't all, though..."

"What?"

"No, it's nothing."

Although I didn't quite understand what she was getting at, her next words caught my attention more.

"In any case, I honestly cannot stand to see Mana so depressed."

Could you say something to her, Master?"

"Me?"

"I believe that would be best."

Would it be? I questioned that, but Katou's best friend was the one telling me this. After our meeting with the exploration team, Katou had apologized to me about Mitarai, and I'd told her not to worry about it, but maybe that wasn't enough.

"Got it. I'll talk to her."



After dinner, Katou passed the time in a separate room with Rose. Rose came out, saying that she was getting some tea ready. I took the tea she prepared on a tray and went to their room.

"Here you go, Master."

Rose opened the door for me, seeing that I had no empty hands. We then entered the room together—or so I thought, but Rose came to a stop.

"Well then, Master, please take care of the rest."

By the time a question mark floated in my mind, the door had shut behind me. I'd been under the impression that Rose would be with me, but she'd meant for me to speak with Katou alone. I'd misunderstood.

Normally, I wouldn't mind, but it was a little troubling in this instance. It wasn't that I didn't want to; it just felt awkward. As for the reason for that—I tried not to think about how pathetic it was and switched gears. I resolutely turned to look inside the room.

"Huh...?" I mumbled, befuddled. I couldn't see Katou anywhere.

That question was immediately answered, though. After stepping inside, I found Katou sitting at a desk in a blind spot from the door. She was lying over it, making it even harder to spot her.

"Is she sleeping...?"

I could hear her quietly breathing. She'd apparently fallen asleep during the short time that Rose had left the room. Using her arms as a pillow, her face was turned my way. She looked so defenseless sleeping like that. When I looked at her, it even made me feel strangely guilty.

Katou always seemed precarious and fleeting. Whenever that came to the fore, my desire to protect her increased. That said, as I was now, I properly recognized that there was more to my feelings for her. Perhaps my wavering emotions caused my hands to shake, because the cups on top of the tray clinked loudly.

"Ah... Senpai."

It turned out she wasn't sleeping very deeply. Hearing the sound, Katou woke up right away.

“Sorry for waking you,” I said as she sat herself up. “Anyway, if you’re gonna sleep, you’re better off going to bed.”

“No. I just dozed off a little...”

At a glance, Katou’s expression looked the same as usual, but considering her personality, that didn’t put me at ease.

“Huh? Where’s Rose?” Katou asked a beat later, suddenly coming to a realization.

“Looks like she had something to do,” I said, indicating the tray in my hands. “She asked me to bring you this.”

She sank into thought for a bit. This was Katou we were talking about, so she might’ve noticed Rose’s consideration. Regardless, she didn’t point it out.

“Thank you. I’ll have some then,” Katou said, standing up and taking the tray from me. “I’ll pour it, so please take a seat.”

“Sure.”

So I said, but this room was small, and there were no chairs aside from the one Katou was using. I hesitated for a brief moment but sat down on the bed. Soon after, a pleasant scent tickled my nose. Katou walked over with two cups in hand.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks,” I said, accepting a cup.

“Excuse me.”

I thought she’d go back to her chair, but instead, Katou sat on the bed next to me. There wasn’t even space for a hand between us. She sat close enough for our arms to touch, almost as if she was going to lean against me.

The reason this weighed on my mind wasn’t because it was particularly unusual or anything. This closeness was very normal to us now. Without my even noticing, it had become a matter of course to the point that I hadn’t really been conscious of it. Thinking back to the days when I only ever looked at her with suspicion, it felt truly strange. However, as we were now, this was natural.

That said, that was only between us. How would a total stranger interpret this? I doubted they would see it as normal. More likely, they would view it as special. To us, our relationship was “special as trustworthy companions” and not “special as a man and woman.”

On the other hand, no one but our companions would know that. This close, we did look like a couple. Maybe that was how Mitarai saw it. In that case, I could understand why she’d acted that way. To a high school girl, seeing a guy who had relationships with multiple women trying to get closer to her friend would be cause to put a stop to it.

Nevertheless, it was all a misunderstanding. Yes. Just a misunderstanding... It was supposed to be. I tipped back my cup and

wet my throat before speaking.

"I heard from Rose," I said. "Is Mitarai still on your mind?"

"She is. I'd be lying if I said it didn't bother me," Katou said, nodding honestly, then her expression darkened quickly. "I thought it'd be nice if my relationship with Aoi could help you make a connection with the exploration team. The only links we have with them are Shimazu and Iino, after all."

"Is that so...?"

"Yes. I was so stupid. In the end, it turned out the total opposite."

If that was what she'd been planning, then that development must've been an even greater shock for her.

"The option of joining the exploration team vanished because of it," Katou said with a dejected sigh. "Not only that, it might've worsened any relations we have with them."

Just as Rose had said, Katou looked awfully depressed about it. It was, in fact, the right choice to come talk with her about it. I needed to follow up with her.

"Not really. I don't mind," I said.

"But Senpai..." Katou said, looking up at me.

"Either way, with that incident between Draconia and Okazaki, there's no joining them."

"That's only in hindsight."

"Besides, I was already thinking of refusing them."

"You were?" Katou said, her breath catching slightly.

"Somehow or other, yeah. I was thinking it in the corner of my mind."

That was why it hadn't come as much of a shock that things had ended up this way. I simply thought to myself, "That went as expected."

"Part of my meeting with the exploration team today was to make that point clear," I added.

Naturally, throwing away the choice from the very beginning would narrow our possibilities. Plus, I'd also considered just maybe joining them, so I'd given it serious thought. Although, with the matter of Draconia and their perception of Lily, that possibility had gone out the window.

"Depending on how you look at it, you could say that we got to hear the exploration team's thoughts thanks to Mitarai," I said. "It really saved us to hear how they wanted to use Lily as a tool to revive the dead. So there's nothing for you to worry about, Katou."

"I see..."

She could tell I was being honest, so she nodded with relief. However, her gaze quickly fell to the cup in her hands. Her expression was sullen again. I wondered why that was. It looked like I'd gotten

through to her, so why was she depressed again? Just maybe, something else was bothering her. Around the time I figured that out, Katou opened her mouth to speak.

“Um, Senpai. There’s one more thing I want to apologize for.”

“Apologize? To me?”

“Yes.”

She timidly raised her eyes from her cup to me, as if she was scared of my reaction.

“It’s about what I told Aoi,” she said. “About how, um...I don’t like you.”

My body stiffened.

“I don’t like Majima-senpai or anything. Your misunderstanding is causing trouble.”

Those words remained stuck deep in my ears.

“That’s not what I meant,” Katou said, choosing her words in a panic. “That makes it sound as if I hate you or something. But that’s not what I meant. It’s because Aoi was acting like that, so I just said it. I...respect you. You’re, like, important to me. I definitely don’t hate you.”

She spoke falteringly and had trouble saying what she wanted. Nevertheless, she needed to get this across to me. I could sense that.

At this stage, I was probably supposed to say, “It’s okay, I know,” right away. We’d confirmed the fact that we were precious companions to each other, not that I’d ever doubted that. Nevertheless, I found myself speechless for a moment. Now that she brought it up, I realized something. No, rather than realizing, maybe it was better to say that I could no longer turn a blind eye to it.

I knew this was because of what she’d said to Mitarai. Regardless, it really bothered me. It was stupid of me. Even I thought I was being dumb. Still, I didn’t think it was worthless.

Logic didn’t apply.

Reasoning didn’t help.

That was because I was aware of the feelings I had for the girl beside me. Before I knew it, those feelings had grown so much. It was impossible for me to repress them.

“Senpai...?”

Katou raised her voice curiously, sitting close enough to me that if I reached out, I could hug her. Her voice brushing against my ears, her body heat warming me from her being so close—her petite, delicate, and somewhat uncertain existence felt so dear to me.

This feeling was like a flame. Until now, I’d always drawn a line when it came to Katou, but in this moment, this spreading fire in my chest burned away everything I’d been holding back. Perhaps it was a little ironic that Mitarai had been the trigger for this, but I couldn’t

stop at this point.

“Katou.”

I called her name and touched her shoulder. If she showed the slightest hint that she didn't like it, I meant to pull my hand back right away. However, though she jolted and froze, she didn't seem to hate it.

“S-Senpai...?”

Her cheeks flushed red in an instant, and her eyes moistened.

“Katou, I—”

Just as I was trying to speak the critical words, the terrifying sound of something breaking and boring through something obliterated this time we had to ourselves.

“Wha?!”

“Hyah?!”

Completely by reflex, I pulled Katou in close to me. The cup in her hand fell to the floor and shattered.



“What was that?!”

I kept alert to my surroundings while keeping Katou in my arms. The sound had come from a nearby room. I didn’t know what was going on. All I knew was that the sound was too loud and intense for it to be someone accidentally dropping something or knocking something over. This was an emergency—the kind for which I had to rendezvous with Lily and the others right away. Regrettably, by the time that thought came to mind, it was already too late.

“Wh-Whoa?!”

In the next second, I sensed a thick concentration of mana. By that time, my body was assaulted by a bizarre sensation.

“What...?!”

It felt like I was floating, then slipping, then the world changed. I remembered this feeling.

“This is Fairy—”

In a flash, those words were left far behind with nobody able to do anything about it.

We hadn’t been careless, and we hadn’t skimped on our escort detail, yet this abnormal event defied everything. It had happened so suddenly that I couldn’t deal with it properly. For that reason, I had only one option left to me. I held Katou tight to my chest, making sure not to let go.

13

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Minto Higure
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Napo

Monster Tamer







"Yeah,
back then
I did."

"Hm?
Don't you
go with two
swords?"

KANEKI MIKIHICO
TAKAHIRO'S CLASSMATE

MAJIMA TAKAHIRO
2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT



"You're the one
who doesn't
understand!"

"Mana!
Why won't you
understand?!"

MITARAI AOI
1ST-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT











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by Minto Higure

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